

Berringer of Bandeir

BY

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AUTHOR OF

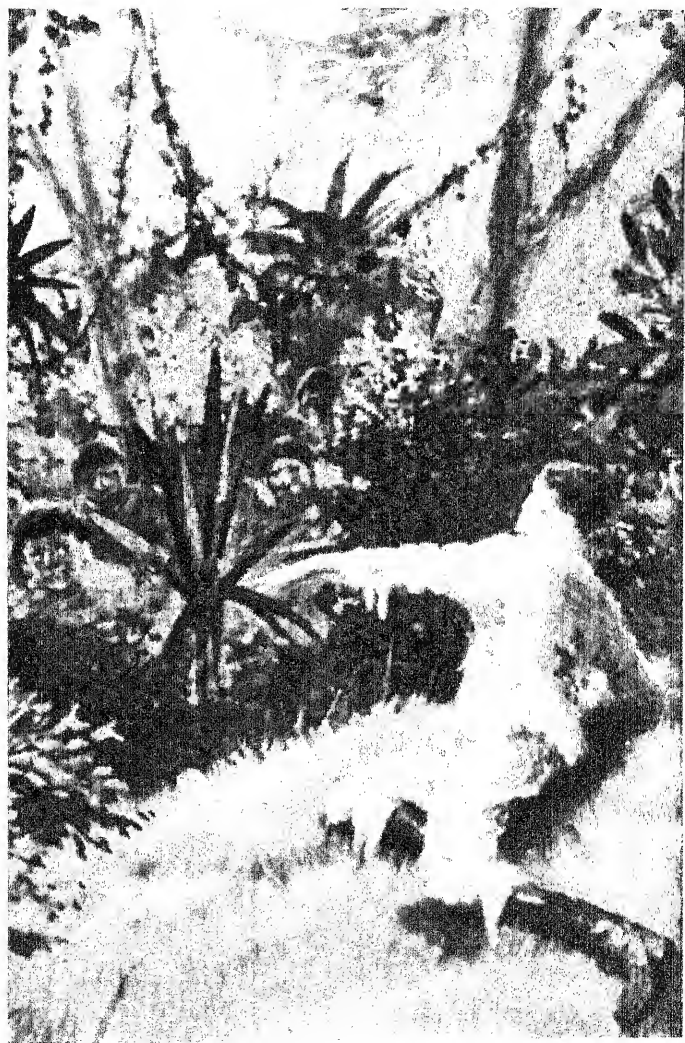
'THE WARDEN OF THE MARCHES,' 'THE KINGDOM OF
WASTE LANDS,' ETC., ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY A. PEARSE

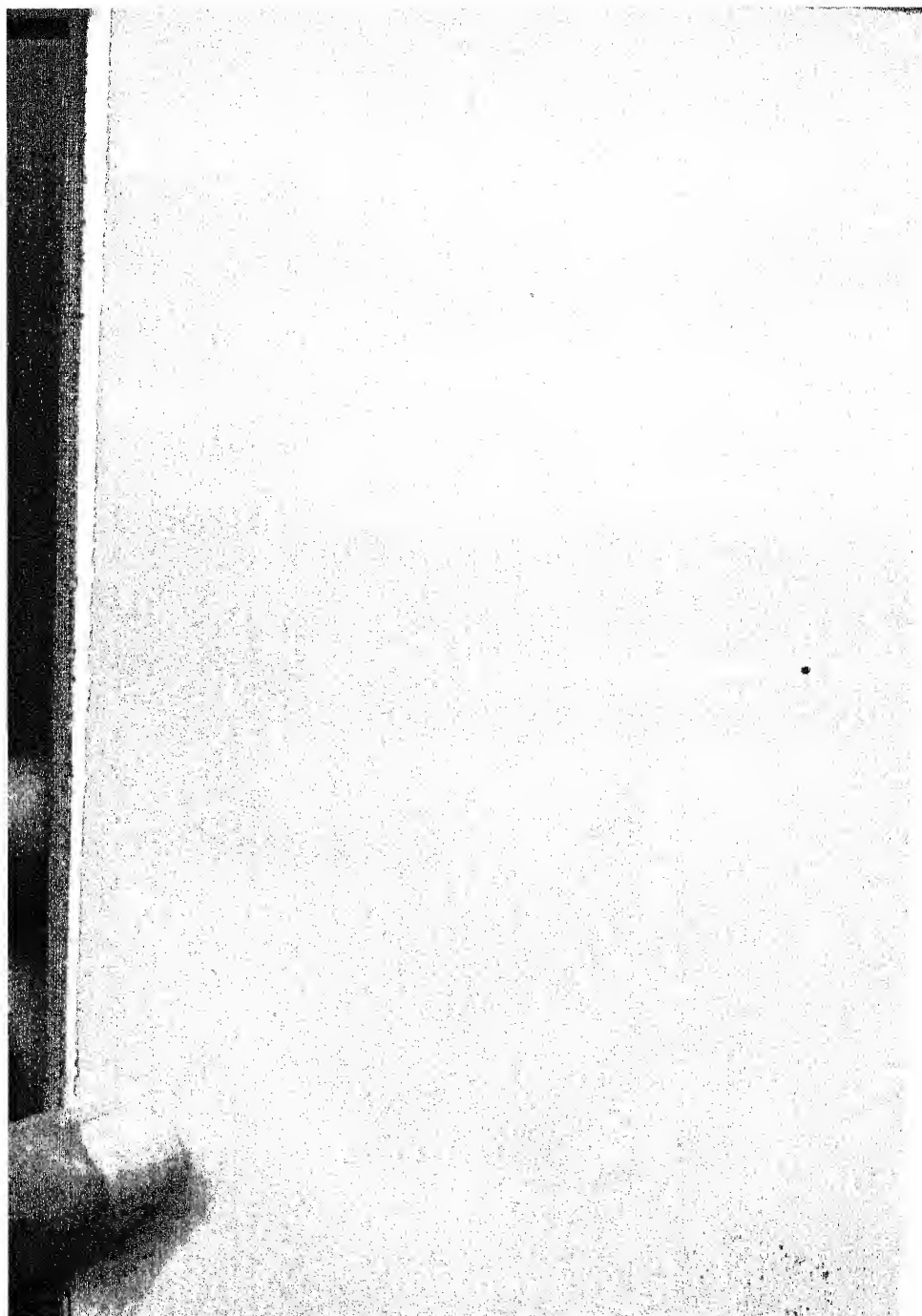
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Berringer of Bandeir



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Berringer of Bandeir.

CHAPTER I.

LOST TO HIS PLACE AND NAME.

"SURELY we are starting very early, aunt? The train won't be in for more than an hour." The tone was pathetic, for Melifred Corvin was still wrestling with a refractory glove as she mounted into the high old-fashioned carriage, and she was one of those who pride themselves on emerging from their rooms with toilet complete to the very last button.

The elder lady who was already seated in the carriage smiled. She had large dark-grey eyes in a beautiful worn face, and the eyes had a trick of smiling even when the rest of the face was serious.

"We are, dear—shamefully early! I ought to have warned you. You will laugh at me when I tell you the reason. There's a particular drive—I call it my farewell drive—which I always like to take just before leaving Beddinghurst for one of these long absences, and this is such a lovely day—and you can hardly depend on the weather at this season——"

"Oh, Aunt Rosamond, I understand, of course! Why didn't you let us start the moment we had finished lunch?"

"Oh, it's not quite such a long drive as that! To the station, but go round by the Marsh," she added to the footman. "I am Sussex still to the very marrow of my bones, in spite of all my wanderings, you see," in playful apology as she turned to Melifred again.

"I only wish I had a county to be devoted to!" sighed the girl. "You can't have a romantic attachment to Hongkong, even if you do happen to have been born there."

"It's not that, quite, for I was born at Lucknow. My husband was born and bred at Sniddingly, yet he would be quite willing never to see Sussex again, and leave his bones in Bandeir at last. I don't think I could rest peacefully anywhere but 'with my fathers,' like the Kings of Judah, and he has promised to bury me in the churchyard here, lest I should 'walk'! But, my dear, what a gruesome conversation! See where sentimentality leads us!"

"I don't think Mr Tournour would mind your 'walking,' if it meant that he knew you were near," said Melifred abruptly. She always found it more difficult to speak than to listen, and the result was that when she was much moved her words were apt rather to resemble bombshells.

"My dear, now you mention it, I don't believe he would," said Mrs Tournour-Darell. Her father's will, obliging her husband to take her name and arms, had burdened the heiress of Bedinghurst sorely in the matter of cognomen. "So that it is purely to gratify my whim—which is all the nicer of him."

"Oh, but he must understand—this place is so lovely——" Melifred shied off hastily from the sentimental to the material as the last turn in the drive brought them again into view of the house, long and low, built of round flints set in even rows, with stone mullions and lintels, and a roof of weathered tiles that had once been red. It stood on a foothill of the Downs, with Scotch firs crowning the little ridge behind it, and throwing up the pale gold and orange-brown of birches and sweet chestnuts.

"No, it isn't even the place. I should feel just the same if it was all like that." They were emerging from the lodge gates, and she flung out a hand lightly towards the distant prospect of bleak olive marsh, seamed with lines of dull green rushes which marked winter water-courses, with its solitary trees all bent one way by the prevailing south-westerly winds, and its brown patches of enclosed woodland fringed with red by their encircling belt of hips and haws. "It's partly the contrast with the tropics, I think. You were too young when you came home

to remember what I mean—that never-changing green. Autumn is such a delight—to know that everything is going to be cleared away, and start afresh! And the austerity of our trees—not lack of colour, for what could be mellower than the tints here?" Her eyes dwelt lovingly on a clump of what Sussex calls French poplar, surely the most satisfying of trees to the eye—whatever may be its demerits as timber—from its first red shoots and fat comfortable catkins of glowing scarlet, through the rust-colour of the young foliage and the quivering bronze-green of summer, to the last broad amber leaves flying like banners against a blue-grey sky in the autumn gales. "The Northern mind can't help feeling there's something improper about forest trees with canopies of pink and apricot blossom far above your head. And if I were a tree, I would rather be choked to death by decent green ivy than by a whole maze of lilac and rose-coloured creepers, even if white and gold and crimson orchids grew all over me afterwards! But don't mind my grumbling. I was as enthusiastic about the Jhalabor jungle as anybody when I first went out, but when you are getting old it's natural you should think most of your ain countrie."

Melfred was pondering things, with her brows drawn together. "But I don't see why you should have to go out to Bandeir again, when you would rather stay at home," she said slowly.

"Because my husband is there, if for no other reason. It would look bad—worse than *John Gilpin*—'If wife should live at Beddinghurst, And husband in Bandeir'—wouldn't it? Besides, we have a foolish fondness for each other's society, and as he can't come home, even if he would, it's quite evident I can't stay at home either."

"But he could come home, if only Mr Berringer would go out and take his proper place in Bandeir."

"He could, but he mightn't wish it. I could not endure to see him at a loose end, moping about the place, like a good many men when they retire. We should both be miserable, instead of one perfectly happy, and the other—moderately so. No, I won't have that! How ungrateful I am! I have had a delightful summer here, settled the boys comfortably, made ideal arrangements for their holidays,—oh, I must really remember to

say vacs. !—and actually let Bedinghurst—at least I hope so—and let it well, if your Mr Falck comes up to his promises. And to crown all, I can leave you in charge of my poor people.”

“I am only afraid you will find them spoilt when you come back next. Mr Falck is so anxious that Erna should be really English—a regular Lady Bountiful. But you oughtn’t to have to be thankful for letting Bedinghurst, Aunt Rosamond. You ought to be reigning here yourself. Why should you have to go back to Bandeir instead of the person whose business it is?”

“It’s an unfathomable mystery, my husband would tell you—but then he thinks Bandeir is the real Earthly Paradise. I have my suspicions, and I am very anxious to know whether I am right. I am going to try to find out.”

“I should say it was an unfathomable mystery too,” said Melifred slowly. “Bandeir has been the Earthly Paradise to me as long as I can remember. I suppose it’s having known you—and reading every scrap I could find about it—and feeling how splendid Sir Gilbert Berringer was, putting down piracy and head-hunting, and taming the savages by kindness. And then Lady Berringer—going out to marry him after all those years of separation, and never coming home again. And their son stays in England doing nothing, while his uncle and you are slaving to keep his inheritance together for him!”

“It does sound mysterious, I know. But there are reasons. You never knew Horace’s mother, Melifred—my dearest friend. Have you ever met a person who was surrounded by fear like a wall? I don’t mean that other people were afraid of her, but that she was afraid of other people—of new faces, fresh scenes, unaccustomed circumstances, of anything and everything outside the routine of daily life.”

“A common coward!” said Melifred scornfully. “But—Lady Berringer?”

“Not at all—an *uncommon* coward, if she was a coward. Some people never think about fear at all; they go forward and do all sorts of wonderful things quite happily. Those are the naturally brave, I suppose. Then there are the other people who also don’t think about fear, but—owing to fear—simply do nothing risky that they can possibly shirk. But what I call the *uncommon* cowards are the people who ask themselves,

‘Am I afraid?’ and reply quite honestly, ‘Yes, dreadfully.’ Then it is a question whether they will conquer fear, or fear will conquer them.”

“But Lady Berringer conquered fear.”

“She did, but it cost her perpetual effort. You might say that she realised the necessity too late. She was brought up in very restricted surroundings, painfully hedged in, continually snubbed by her family, so that self-effacement seemed actually a virtue. Then when it became a duty to take action on her own account—to put herself forward, so to speak—it meant a continual battle with her natural self. As I said just now, it was as if she was imprisoned within a wall of fear, and forced by a sense of duty to make perpetual efforts to escape.”

“But Mr Berringer has not been snubbed and hedged in. He is a man; he has nothing to be afraid of.”

“Ah, my dear, how can we mothers know which nature we shall hand down to our children—what we are, or what we long to be? That’s what I always say to myself, when poor Horace’s behaviour puzzles me—has he inherited his mother’s timidity without the moral courage she struggled for and attained? And if so, will he take up the struggle too? We can’t fight our children’s battles for them, much as we should like to do it.”

“Yes, I see that. But no! he is Sir Gilbert’s son as well as hers. Aunt Rosamond, he has no business to be a coward of any kind—common or uncommon.”

“Dear child”—with a whimsical smile—“we don’t know that he is. But if he should be”—the smile faded—“there is a reason. When you remember how his mother died——”

“It only said she died ‘at sea.’ Was there anything dreadful——?”

“Horace came out to Bandeir when he was nine or ten, with the Bishop and Mrs Donnellan. The Bishop had to go home to be consecrated, and it was thought a good thing that the people should see something of their future ruler. I was to take him home with me the next year. But it was an unhealthy season, and the child was delicate, and when he had been out only six months, it seemed better to send him home at once by Australia, to give him the longer voyage. His mother was to

take him to Swan River in our Bandeir-built schooner the *Star of Hope*, to pick up a steamer whose captain my husband had sailed under and knew well. Melifred, they never reached Swan River. A cyclone took them out of their course and drove them into Torres Straits, and there they drifted about, dismantled, for weeks—out of sight of land, the boats gone, fever on board, never a breeze. When the schooner was sighted at last, every man on board was dead. Lettice—Lady Berringer—died as they lifted her on board the rescuing ship. The boy was insensible, but recovered. His mother's Chinese maid, the only other survivor, told how the crew had insisted on keeping the last of the fresh water for Sir Gilbert's wife and child, and she had given hers to the boy. That was all. Horace was never allowed to be told, but he may know—or have guessed——”

“And he feels he was his mother's murderer?” Melifred's voice was awestruck.

“No, no; I hope not that. It would be unreasonable—when you think he was probably insensible when she poured the water down his throat. But a feeling of horror—inseparably connected with Bandeir and with his mother's memory— When I brought him home, it was only just before the voyage came to an end that I succeeded in getting him to talk about his mother. Not about her death, of course, but her sayings and doings in the few months he had known her—and I hoped the horror was passing away gradually. But I had to hand him over to the Charles Berringers, who had taken charge of him when he was a baby, and I know what Theodosia—Mrs Berringer—would do. Purely out of kindness, she would forbid any mention of his mother in his presence, and the horror would close round him again. And about Bandeir—she never approved of Gilbert's going out, and she would do all she could to turn the boy's thoughts away from it. Her husband? Oh, poor Charles knows the hand upon the reins! It wouldn't have signified so much if Sir Gilbert had lived, for of course he would have had Horace out as soon as he left school; but when he died, the Charles Berringers insisted so strongly upon the advantages of Oxford that my husband felt it would be wrong to stand in the boy's light. But we thought he would have come out long before this.”

"But what right had Mrs Charles Berringer——?"

"His father left them his guardians, dear. It was natural enough—his own elder brother, Lettice's elder sister. And there was my husband with all the work at his fingers' ends, and the prestige of having been Sir Gilbert's greatest friend. It answered quite well for a year or two, but now the chiefs are demanding why Datu Berringer's son doesn't come out and take over the government. No one else can fill the place of Berringer of Bandeir."

"But can't he see it for himself?"

"Apparently not. Perhaps he never reads our letters. Certainly he has very nearly succeeded in not meeting me, if that's what he dreads. I think he may fear being reminded of his mother, you know. But at any rate, I wrote to him as soon as I landed, begging him either to meet me in London or to come down here, but he only said—it was quite a nice letter—that he was just leaving for Germany, and would be there the whole summer."

"Germany? What part, I wonder? and what could he be doing there?" said Melifred, with interest.

"I don't know. Theodosia Berringer has not been communicative. I think she was afraid I should whisk poor Horace off to Bandeir, whether he would or no, if I once came across him. But something in one of his letters alarmed her terribly, lest he should have fallen in love with a German girl, and she realised that it would be a shocking thing for me to leave England again without seeing him at all, so she ordered him home and to Bedinghurst."

"He can't have cared much for the German girl!"

"My dear, we don't even know that she exists! As far as I can make out, what Horace really cares for is slumming, and no doubt he went to Germany to study methods or make enquiries of some kind." For these were the hopeful days of the early eighties, when the great discovery had just been made that London was to be regenerated by carrying to the East End the culture of the West, the carriers being earnest young men with long hair and high ideals, and equally earnest young women with hard bowler hats on close-cropped heads and masculine ulsters. It strikes the present generation as quaint to remember that to

these youthful philanthropists Germany stood forth as having successfully solved the problem of reconciling mercy with justice in matters of social reform.

"He should leave London to the people whose duty lies there," said Melifred severely. "Bandeir is his slum."

"Oh, my dear, if it was a slum we should have had him out there long ago! As it is only a 'summer isle of Eden,' well out of sight, it can safely be neglected."

"Safely?" said Melifred, with meaning. "Will Mr Berringer think so when you get hold of him, Aunt Rosamond?"

Mrs Tournour-Durell laughed. "It's just possible he may see things in a fresh light before he leaves Beddinghurst," she admitted. "There's the train! We are in excellent time."

The young man who came across the line to them when the train had departed was as disappointing in appearance as in character, so Melifred decided. Of likeness to the picturesque early portrait of Sir Gilbert Berringer which was her dearest treasure there was not a trace. Happily he had not carried his philanthropic enthusiasm so far as to let his hair grow long, and he had the neat little moustache of the normal young man of his day. "Absolutely ordinary!" was the disgusted verdict of the girl sitting opposite him, until he raised his eyes. Then she was almost appalled—so large and dark and tragic were they. A man with those eyes might be a hopeless failure—even, as she had called him, a coward, but a common coward, never! For the rest, he greeted his aunt with a kind of shy repressiveness, as though he feared being met with embarrassing demonstrations of affection in public, shook hands stiffly with "my god-daughter, Melifred Corvin," when he was introduced to her, and then asserted himself somewhat astonishingly by taking the lead in the conversation and keeping it in his own hands.

"Quite Berringer of Bandeir!" said Melifred to herself, as she heard Mrs Tournour-Durell patiently answering enquiries as to the health of her husband and the whereabouts of her two sons—Gilbert just entered at Cambridge, and Tom—by special favour of the Indian Government—at Cooper's Hill. "But wait, my good youth—just wait!" as she stole a sidelong glance and caught the gleam of amusement in the grey eyes. If Horace Berringer thought he was going to balk his Aunt Rosamond of

any information she had made up her mind to get, there was a salutary lesson in store for him.

"But I do see that it's not altogether his fault if he is ineffective," she made honourable amends for her earlier harsh judgment as she and her hostess went upstairs to dress for dinner. "That tragedy has shadowed his whole life. You can see it in his eyes."

Then Mrs Tourneur-Durell said a curious thing. "Do you know, Melifred, his mother's eyes were just the same? And I know, by early likenesses of her that I have seen, that the tragic look was far more marked in her girlhood than when I knew her in Bandeir. It comes from what you fear, not from what you have really gone through."

"Then does Aunt Rosamond mean that he is a coward after all?" Melifred asked herself in perplexity, and went down to dinner feeling that an interesting psychological problem had been provided for her delectation. Once more Mr Berringer showed himself determined to keep the ball of conversation rolling on his own lines, as though to guard against being questioned. He talked readily on all sorts of topics of the day, but with a hurry of manner that somehow suggested desperation rather than interest. Once Melifred's eye, following the direction of his aunt's, lit upon the hand with which he was crumbling his bread upon the table. It was shaking like an aspen leaf. But at the same moment the trembling became apparent to himself, and the effort with which he checked it, gripping the piece of bread with such force that it broke, was perfectly obvious to the two women watching him. Perhaps he caught Melifred's eyes upon him, for he carried the war promptly into the enemy's country by turning to address her.

"Rather absurd for me to say 'Miss Corvin,' isn't it?" he asked. "If we have the same aunt, we must be cousins, surely?"

The audacity disconcerted Melifred. "Aunt Rosamond is everybody's aunt," she said lamely.

"But I am glad to say no one has ever ventured to call me 'Auntie.' There I draw the line," said Mrs Tourneur-Durell, coming to her aid. "Melifred has been my adopted niece ever since her poor distracted father gave her into my charge as a

tiny baby at Singapore. If I could have settled at home, she would have lived with us here."

Melifred wondered whether the young man would scent a reproach in the last words, but he turned to her quickly with a smile that lighted up his whole face. "Why—I do believe—you must be 'Meess Milly'!" he said.

"They will call me that—though I hate it—because it sounds 'so English'!" said Melifred disgustedly. "But how—— Do you know the Falcks, then?"

"Yes, very—— At least, I have seen a good deal of them this summer," in some confusion. "To think I never guessed you were the good fairy who had been the means of leading them to this delightful place! And you are to stay with them again in the winter, aren't you?"

"I am Miss Falck's companion," Melifred shot out the words at him with something of defiance, for the girl who had to earn her own living was still regarded with mingled pity and contempt. But Mr Berringer was not thinking of her at all.

"How awfully jolly for you!" he said, with genuine fervour.

"Yes, it is an excellent post," said Melifred, with tempered rapture—"almost unique, I should think. We share everything together. I have even to get my frocks from Paris, as Erna does hers, because 'to humiliate modest merit by contrasting it with affluence is repugnant to the sympathetic mind.'"

"That sounds like a quotation." Young Berringer was regarding her as though he suspected a spice of uncalled-for bitterness in her tone.

"So it is—from Mr Falck. Don't you recognise the manner? He is a little Pecksniffy at times, isn't he?"

"I have not noticed it." The suspicion was confirmed, evidently, and he turned deliberately from her, and began to tell Mrs Tournear-Durell of the kindness he had met with from Mr and Miss Falck.

"One for me!" said Melifred to herself, in dismay. "That's what always happens when I think I am saying something smart, like girls in books. But, oh dear! it was a catfish thing to say. Of course he is in love with Erna. He must be the romantic stranger she has been rhapsodizing about all the

summer. I guessed he must be an Englishman, but she was far too much wrapped up in her ecstasies to think of such trifles as names. But how very curious! Mr Falek likes him then, I suppose. Yet I should have thought——”

It was certainly very strange, for her summer holiday, which was to have lasted only a month, had been extended several times for various cogent reasons, culminating in a suggestion, which she read as practically a command, that she should accept her godmother's invitation to Bedinghurst, which she had mentioned, and anticipate Mr Falek's winter tenancy by checking inventories and going through lists on his behalf. Yet it was Melifred's special business to act as watch-dog and warn off virtuous and impecunious young men from approaching the heiress. “The goot yong poor man—that is our dancher,” Mr Falek had said to her when she first went to Germany, with the mellow laugh which was his greatest asset. “The goot rich yong man—he is so terribly unattractif, and the bad yong man, poor or rich—the pure mind will feel no attraction towards him, but the other—keep him at a distance, Meess Milly, and gif me warning of him!”

Clearly, then, Mr Falek must have taken a fancy to Horace Berringer, who was undeniably poor, unless—Melifred drew in her breath. Would Bander be accepted in lieu of wealth? She knew little of Mr Falek's business, but she was aware that the group of Hamburg merchants to which he belonged were turning their eyes eastwards in search of further commercial worlds to conquer, and the unexploited possibilities of Bander—unexploited partly for sheer lack of capital on the ruler's part—might have appealed to them. If so, Erna's obvious interest in the dark-eyed Englishman would naturally be encouraged rather than checked, and could hardly have failed of awakening a response. For if Erna was sentimental—with the devastating German sentimentality beside which the English variety is but as moonlight unto sunlight—she was also extremely pretty, and a man must have a heart of stone to resist her. Could they be engaged already?

“I ought not to have said that.” Melifred broke ruthlessly into the guest's description of Baireuth, whither the conversation had now drifted. “Mr Falek has been awfully kind to me—

and he is my employer, too. But he does talk rather like the virtuous father in the old children's books, doesn't he?"

Mr Berringer was obviously casting about to discover what she was talking about. "Er—quite so, no doubt. But I really haven't noticed it," he said coldly at last, and Melifred felt so severely snubbed that she did not venture to put the leading question she had in her mind. But she had her revenge in the drawing-room afterwards, when she and her hostess were sitting by the fire. At the first sound of the opening of the dining-room door she was on her feet.

"Then I will go through the china in the morning-room, and leave you to have a good talk with Mr Berringer, Aunt Rosamond," she was saying when he came in. "I know you must be longing for it!" she added sweetly as she passed him.

CHAPTER II.

THE BURDEN OF AN HONOUR.

IF Mr Berringer were longing for a talk with his aunt, he dissembled the fact very successfully. His look suggested resentment rather than pleasure as he took his stand upon the rug, and remarked, without giving Mrs Tournour-Durell time to utter a word, "Curious name Miss Corvin has—Melifred! Very unusual, isn't it?"

"I believe it is quite unique nowadays. It has been handed down through generations of Corvins—from the days of the Goths, I suppose. 'Heavenly peace,' it means."

"The Gothic part sounds more suitable than the meaning, I should say. The young lady strikes me as decidedly censorious—not to say cantankerous."

"I'm afraid she is not one of the people who show their best side to strangers. Miss Falck, now—she would not have said what Melifred did?"

"I have never heard her say an unkind word of anybody!" with enthusiasm. "She is the sweetest, gentlest——" a perfect agony of blushing confusion swallowed up the rest of the sentence.

"An angel in everything but the wings?" supplied Mrs Tournour-Durell helpfully.

"Yes, that's really——" He looked up, caught the lurking smile in her glance, and subsided into deeper confusion still. His aunt regarded him thoughtfully, noting the sensitiveness of the mouth, which at once explained and emphasized the tragic expression of the eyes. It seemed cruel to fall upon him at a moment when the protective armour in which he had so care-

fully encased himself was temporarily out of action, but Rosamond Tournour-Durell had grown up in a stern school. This man had more important things to think of than the facile loves and enthusiasms of the ordinary youth. He was Berringer of Bandeir. If, as so often happens in this imperfect world, the tasks before him were not fitted to his nature, his nature must be fitted to the tasks. Therefore there was no relenting, though there was abundant compassion, in her voice as she said, still with that far-off suggestion of a smile, "Well, Horace, what have you been doing?"

He looked up again quickly, then dropped his eyes. "Nothing," he muttered sullenly. "I assure you you are mistaken. What have I got to offer her?"

"No, no, it is you who are mistaken!" she said hastily. "I shouldn't dream of cross-questioning you about your love affairs." He looked visibly relieved, and she held out a friendly hand, and drew him down to the low seat beside her. "Don't think me such an ogress, Horace. Tell me what nefarious deed you have been committing, that you would never give me a chance of seeing you before, and now you are terrified of what I may say to you?"

He glanced at her like a trapped animal, and the sullen look returned. "It was not my fault that the British Government refused to take over Bandeir," he muttered. "I did all I could."

Her blood quickened at the apprehension of danger. It was something that concerned Bandeir, then—the beloved spot to whose building-up her husband had enthusiastically given the work of a lifetime, and she herself uncomplainingly sacrificed all that wealth and position held for her at home. But she must not be hasty. Above all things it was essential to win the confidence of the youth in whose reluctant hands the death of the founder of the state had left the reins of power. She leaned back in her corner and smiled upon him—the slow, almost imperceptible smile that had led so many men captive in their day. "But of course I know that!" she assured him heartily. "Did you think we were blaming you, my dear boy? I assure you we were far more rejoiced than otherwise when the negotiations failed. I know it was your father's wish that England

should take over the country, but we all thought he never felt very eager about it except when he was in difficulties for money, and feeling rather discouraged. You may be quite sure that all Bandeir was heartily relieved by the refusal. No India Office administration could take the Berringer place."

"Yes, I know that's the family legend!" with a laugh that sounded less light and careless than he wished to make it.

"It's more than a legend. It is the truth. And Bandeir is very much in need of its Berringer at the present moment. Your uncle has told you that?"

He looked up at her again with a touch of hardihood. "It's rather a shame to say it, but I don't get very far with Uncle Peter's letters." This was not surprising, in view of Uncle Peter's writing, as his wife reflected ruefully. "When you are there, and write for him, it's different."

"Well, I am here now, and can tell you things instead of writing them—whatever you want to know. You do understand that your uncle feels there is cause for anxiety?"

"Money, as usual!" bitterly. "The little I have—he grudges my spending it at home, instead of in Bandeir."

"No, no, Horace, it's not money! At least, it is money, of course; it always is—but we could manage with what we have if only we had you there. We want our head among us. The chiefs are never tired of asking when you are coming out. I believe they sometimes suspect your uncle of keeping you at home for reasons of his own."

"Oh, I say, that's an awful shame!" he cried boyishly. "No one could have tried harder to get me out than poor old uncle."

"That's how they look at it, you see. Well, Horace, when are you coming to Bandeir? Is there any chance of my having your escort when I sail next month?"

"Well, no, I'm afraid not. Things at home—requiring attention——" he stammered.

"But what can there be here that demands your presence more than your duties in Bandeir? Forgive me, Horace—your mother and I were such friends, more than sisters to each other—is it Miss Fulck? You don't mind my asking?"

"I thought I had told you there was nothing between us,"

with an access of dignity that vanished quickly. "I—I am nothing to her."

"You mean that she won't give you a decided answer? But surely nothing would be more likely to bring her to the point than to know you were leaving England? And you would be doubly welcome in Bandeir if you brought out a wife with you. Or if that would be going too fast, I will put off my voyage and bring her out to you in the spring, if you like to take my cabin and go out next month."

Once again the tone was sullen. "I tell you there's nothing of that sort. I haven't asked her."

"But you intend to ask her? Or is it that she has an objection to living abroad? In that case—I don't want to be unkind—but you could not think of sacrificing your duty for her?"

Silence—a troubled, it might be a guilty, silence. Something of indignation mingled itself with Mrs Tourneur-Durell's anxiety. Why could not the boy say frankly what was the matter, instead of forcing her to drag everything out of him? "No, I won't insult you by supposing that," she said quickly. "But I do beg of you to tell me what is wrong. As your uncle's wife—after all he has done to keep the government together for you—I think I have a right to know. Is it—are you in debt?" His reference to money had opened a vista of possible extravagance at the University, though the idea seemed ludicrous in connection with the small, safe College—selected by his aunt Theodosia—the inmates of which, so a ribald nephew at Sniddering had informed her, were known in Oxford as "the Frowsters," from their alleged dread of the open air.

"I have not mortgaged the magnificent revenues of Bandeir," he answered, with the same bitterness as before. "The fact of the matter is—I'm afraid your feelings will be awfully hurt, aunt—I have no intention of going back—at any rate permanently. I am thinking of parting with Bandeir."

"I believe this will kill your uncle!" The first dismayed exclamation escaped her unawares, then she rallied her forces and put a severe curb on her tongue. "Horace," she said, in a voice that trembled despite her utmost resolution, "you have shocked—startled—me very much. Please tell me exactly what

you mean. Surely you understand that you can't 'part with Bander' as if it was an estate at home?"

"I'm awfully sorry—— I say, can I get you some water or anything?" A shake of the head answered him, and he went on, attempting uneasily to justify himself. "You see, it's not as if I had any taste or fitness for that kind of life. All my interests are at home here, I have no yearning whatever for adventures, I hate strangers—especially 'niggers'"——he ventured a smile which met with no response. "And there's that eternal demand for money—I can read uncle's letters well enough to see that he's always lamenting the impossibility of developing the place properly because we have none of us any money to put into it. With the British Government behind us we could have done something, I understand, but now that the protectorate is definitely refused, investors won't look at us. Well, if England won't find the money, other people will."

"You would sell your birthright!"

He shook himself irritably. "If it comes to that, my father often thought of putting himself under the protection of the United States—or even Holland."

"Only in his very darkest hours, when the British Government was treating him worst, and Bander seemed to be threatened on all sides. But he always escaped the necessity in the end. I don't believe he could have brought himself to do it when it came to the point. And there is no such emergency now."

"Only the money emergency," impatiently. "And that will go on for ever unless we can get hold of some cash somehow."

"But if you parted with Bander for money, how would that be putting money into Bander?"

"I don't intend to part with it for money. At least, the little I should get out of it would hardly be worth calling money. It's for the sake of the place itself, Aunt Rosamond. Look here, I'll tell you how it came to pass. I was introduced to the Falcks by the people I was boarding with in Hamburg, and because Mr Falck was in treaty with you for this place, he was awfully interested when he heard my name. We had a lot of talk together at one time and another; he cares for all the things I don't—big dreams of commercial expansion, Europe too small for him, and all that—and the thing began to take shape gradu-

ally. His idea is a regular company—like the East India Company—to develop Bandeir; he and his friends will find the money. I shouldn't be selling my birthright, as you call it, because I understand that if I divested myself of my rights they would go back to the Sultan of Jhalabor, but leasing it, so to speak. And you needn't think"—warmly—"that I have forgotten my uncle and the boys. I thought of them first of all. Falck said he would infinitely prefer the present officials to go on holding their posts, and working, as they have always done, for the good of Bandeir."

"But under a foreign company, and another flag!"

"Oh, well, that can't be helped, can it? It just happens so, unfortunately. The Company is to be registered in Brussels, I believe. But Falck said he should not be surprised if there was a good deal of feeling in Bandeir, and he might have to ask me to go out for a short visit just to smooth things down. I told him I shouldn't mind that if I knew it was to be only temporary. It's the settling down out there that I bar, and he quite understands. But everything is to be done in the handsomest way possible, for the good of every one, and nobody will have anything to complain of. You do see that, don't you?"

Rosamond Tournour-Durell looked resolutely at the carpet, and closed her lips firmly. There was no smile now, even in the remotest depths of her eyes, and the words on the tip of her tongue had been, "And the girl is the bribe!" But after a pause no more than sufficient to suggest that she was turning the matter over in her mind, she spoke quietly enough. "It hasn't struck you, I suppose, that the Bandeir government is not an autocracy? The people have a very effective voice in their own affairs, and they will certainly object strongly to being handed over to Mr Falck's Company—or any one else's."

"But that's what I tell you, aunt. If they are so awfully loyal to us, they're bound to listen to me when I tell them how much better I am doing for them by handing them over than by keeping them myself. The country properly developed—new channels of trade opened up—opportunities for everybody—and all that sort of thing, don't you know?"

"And when Bandeir replies with one voice, as it undoubtedly will, that it prefers the most poverty-stricken Berringer to the

wealthiest alien Company that ever poured out money like water, what will you say then?"

"Oh, I say, you know, they ought to think of me a little, when I am thinking such a lot of them! It's for their own sakes—for their good—not just to accommodate me——"

"Horace, is that quite true?"

He wriggled uncomfortably, discerning in the words the accusing note which she had striven to keep out of them. "Well, at any rate, it's to accommodate both of us," he protested. "All I ask for is enough to live on at home—in quite a small way. It's not as if I was going to make a fortune out of parting with my rights—leasing them, I mean——"

Ever afterwards Mrs Tourneur-Durell was devoutly thankful that she did not inform her nephew baldly that he was a worm, and never ceased to wonder that she had refrained. "And when you get out to Bandeir," she said—with the broken utterance of intense but restrained indignation—"where your father lived and died—for which he lived and died—where your mother lived for him and died for you—yes, Horace, I must say it"—as he lifted in passionate protest a face which had grown suddenly pale—"and it occurs to you that perhaps, just possibly, you have some little shred of duty to it—duty which can't be fulfilled by handing it over to other people to make money out of, but which demands your own life as well, and perhaps your own death—what then?"

"Oh, well—if you will have it"—he spoke with an agitation equal to her own—"it's because I am afraid of disgracing—them—that I refuse to go and take my father's place."

"*Disgracing them?* But what disgrace could be greater than to forsake the duty they have left you? Horace, my dear boy"—her voice thrilled with entreaty—"let us understand one another. Don't keep things back. I want to do you justice; I want to realise your point of view. I loved your mother; it would break my heart to see her son unworthy of her. Tell me exactly what you mean. How could you disgrace them?"

"It's Bandeir." He spoke with sullen embarrassment, as one who has been drawn reluctantly into a display of emotion which he would have given anything to avoid. "I hate the place. You hint at my being tempted to stay if I once got there—I

tell you I am far more likely to funk landing, and desert the ship the night before we arrive. I have a perfect horror— Well, I have two bad dreams. For years I used to have them night after night; now they come when I am bothered or not sleeping well. One is the sea—oily waves all round reflecting back a dazzling glare from a burning blue sky—and dead men—lying about—on the deck of a ship. And the other is the jungle, with night coming on, and rain dripping somewhere, and a smell of rotting wood or leaves or something, and natives. I dare say they don't seem much to you"—with a sort of indignant shamefacedness—"but they turn me perfectly clammy with horror. And that's what Bandeir means to me."

"I see." The boy's own terrible memories furnished an ample explanation of the one dream, but the other—was it the reflection of some horrifying experience of Lettice Berringer's early married life, when her husband had been forced to leave her in an up-country fort to the care of natives only? Rosamond could imagine her battling gallantly against the horror—half physical, half spiritual—that threatened to overmaster her. Had it succeeded in overmastering her son? "Yes, Horace, I understand now. Forgive me. Your uncle will say he was perfectly right when he did all he could to advise your mother against coming out to marry your father. She was not the person for Bandeir. And through marrying her, your father has ruined his own life-work, because his son can't take it up. Perhaps it will be some comfort to your poor uncle to think that he foresaw it all."

"Uncle Peter had better not say anything of that sort about my mother in my hearing!" the voice was savage. "Why, in my father's very last letter he says she had been the blessing of his life, and all that he had ever done he owed to her!"

"My poor boy"—very gently—"even if he doesn't say it, how can he help thinking it, when he sees the fear your mother succeeded in conquering reappearing in her son, and making him unable to take his father's place?"

"It's not that!" indignantly,—"at least, not altogether. All the ordinary sort of thing—the governing, and speechifying, and all that—I could do if I tried, I suppose, though I should hate it every hour of the day. But you know as well as I do that

Bandeir means more than that. It means going up-country—into the jungle, living there for months on end, fighting there. And what I know, if you don't, is that when I was doing it, if that horror took hold of me, as it would, I should—funk."

"And for fear of a fear—of a bad dream, you prefer to—funk—now and the rest of your life?"

"Oh, you won't understand!" in despair. "I tell you, aunt, my father had a friend—he told me about him once—who did it. The horror of the jungle got hold of him—or he may have had it all along, I don't know—and he left his post—ran away."

"I know. Ridding was his name. He deserted your father somewhere on the Reba River, and got back to Bandeir with the tale that the whole expedition had been massacred—which was happily not true. But why should you 'strike sail to a fear' because he did?"

"But don't you see? It was bad enough in his case, but in mine! My father's son—funking!"

"Precisely. Your father's son must not funk. He must come out to Bandeir at once and do his duty—for the sake of his parents' memory if not for his own sake."

"But—" he looked at her in bewilderment. "Would you have me disgrace them?"

"Just the opposite. It is staying at home—shirking your duty for fear of a contingency which may never arise—that would disgrace them and yourself. Do your duty, and when the contingency arises, the courage to meet it will come too." She laid her hand on his impressively.

"But if I am naturally a—coward?" very low.

"That I know nothing about. If you have been consistently shirking everything you dislike you have done your best to become one, certainly. But if you are an unwilling, not a willing, coward, do violence to your cowardice now once and for all. It will never be so hard again."

The hand laid on his had a compelling grip, as though she was infusing him with something of her own vitality. He laughed awkwardly as he looked up into the grey eyes.

"I'm done, Aunt Rosamond! You have made me confess to you what I never meant any human being to know, and you are doing what I thought no one on earth could do. Well, the

responsibility is yours, and I hope you'll like the result. If there ever was a fellow less fit——"

"Oh, my dear boy"—she was laughing too, uncertainly, now that the tension was over—"don't start fresh bogeys, please! We shall all rally round you, you may be sure, and cover up your mistakes until you can do it for yourself."

"No!" he said sharply. "I have a little self-respect left, though you mayn't think so after the exhibition I have made of myself to-night. If I go out, I go as nobody in particular, not as Berringer of Bandeir. I must prove myself before I step into my father's shoes. If I fail—why, Uncle Peter will sack a cadet who isn't up to his work, and there's an end of it. If I stand it—if I satisfy myself and you—you shall summon me to the throne and crown me king."

His aunt's brow was furrowed. "Oh dear, oh dear!" she said. "Still, I understand your feeling, Horace. You have made things harder for yourself by staying at home so long. In the circumstances, I suppose—— But I don't like it. I only wish you were more like your father in face, so that you would be recognised whether you wished it or not, but it's only now and then that I see a fleeting look of him. But your uncle must know the truth—that I insist upon. Otherwise I will have nothing to do with it."

"You may tell him—yes, but no one else. And he is on no account to reveal the truth unless I give him leave. My identity remains my own secret."

"I suppose so—but oh, I don't like it! What will you call yourself?"

"Why, if I am to champion my mother's memory against Uncle Peter, I had better be Bliss Turner, I think."

"Not unless you wish to be recognised instantly. Your mother's books are the cherished possession of every Bandeir European, I must tell you. Bliss, if you like—why not Horace Bliss? Then if I forget you are *not* my nephew——"

"Quite so—Horace Bliss, a fellow who has not done much good in the world as yet, but you are taking him out to see if it's possible to make a man of him."

"My dear boy, I don't take out new cadets promiscuous-like! You will have to fill up papers—— Oh, come now, be advised

by me, and give up this absurd idea. Come out as Horatio Berringer, and see the welcome you will have!"

"My dear aunt, I have taken so much of your advice to-night that if I am to keep any self-respect at all, I must refuse a little of it. Horace Bliss or nobody! Do you accept Horace Bliss? Very well, then; he will have the honour of escorting you to Bandeir if he can get a passage."

"And there he will stay, whether he likes it or not," said Mrs Tourneur-Durell, with equal resolution.

"That we shall have to see. You don't realise—do you, aunt?—what I am giving up to please you—risking, at any rate? I have not only myself to consider."

"Mr Falck?" in alarm. "But you don't mean to say—you have not entered into any binding agreement with him?"

"Merely an understanding, so far. But when one is awfully anxious to keep in with a man—not for his own sake, you know—well, this sort of thing is rather a blow, isn't it?"

"Aunt Rosamond, do you know it's long past prayer-time? I believe I have gone through all the china in the house!" Melifred waved an imposing notebook. "But how frightfully tired you look! Mr Berringer, what have you been doing to her?"

"Nothing, dear. We have had a most interesting talk;" Mrs Tourneur-Durell rose rather wearily. "But I do feel as if all the strength had gone out of me, somehow."

A little later, she stopped suddenly on the stairs as she went up to bed. "Of course!" she exclaimed half aloud— "Of course they want to make the place a rival to Singapore. I wonder they have not bid higher for it, but I suppose they were afraid of rousing that poor boy's suspicions. The hope of winning the girl was enough for him. What a happy thing that he should come here just in time! Melifred!" as the girl looked out at the door of her room— "No, I mustn't question you about your employer's plans. What sort of girl is Miss Falck?"

"Erna?" said Melifred thoughtfully. "Well, she is very pretty, you know, aunt. You have seen her photograph. And when you don't know her, you would think she has very sweet manners. I think—on the whole—I should call her rather passive."

"Would she be likely to let herself be used—— No, I have no right to say that. Is she the kind of girl who takes her own way in love matters?"

"Erna is the kind of girl who would fall in love with a tailor's dummy if it had dark eyes and a nice moustache," said Melifred feelingly. "She's always doing it."

CHAPTER III.

THE HEREDITARY FOE.

THE City office of Sansom & Co., Singapore and London, was imposing though dingy—because the dinginess was of the type that suggests a business too important and too well established to require the meretricious aid of paint and polish. As a matter of fact, the premises had been taken over bodily from a historic firm which had lately expired of old age and respectability, and the new door-plate was only in process of assuming, by dint of careful neglect, an aspect according with all the rest. Sansoms as a London house was a plant of the very newest growth, and the managing partner had never seen England until now. He was a slim, youngish-looking man, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a curious trick of keeping his finger-tips concealed. People who knew the East talked vaguely of "black blood somewhere," but Mr Sansom—young Sansom he was called in Singapore—would have repelled the accusation indignantly, and explained to the accuser that his maternal grandmother was a lady of noble Portuguese descent from Malacca. Mr Sansom had a talent for explaining things, and the history of his firm had not been without occasions for its use.

In Singapore Sansoms were originally ships' chandlers—a species of universal provider whose business affords regrettable opportunities for dissension between the middleman and the consumer—and the epithets applied to them where sailormen congregated were lurid and unparliamentary. While it was generally agreed that old Sansom would joyfully have provisioned a pirate ship had he been promised the disposal of her booty, it was also pointed out that if he wished to profit

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by the pirates' return he would have had to provide a new brand of stores. Almost simultaneously with his son's entering the business, old Sansom disappeared, decamping with the assets of the firm, so it was understood, to an island whence there was no extradition. This was not because its nominal possessors were not bound by an extradition treaty, but because they could not go beyond the range of the guns of their settlement without a military expedition, and were therefore hardly in a position to lend assistance to the officers of the law. Whether Mr Sansom, Senior, linked his lot with that of these unfortunates, or cast himself on the hospitality of the original owners of the soil, was unknown; it sufficed that the firm was bankrupt, and that his son found himself in a situation giving full scope to his particular talent. Romantic indeed was his reward. A wealthy foreign gentleman, making a Malay tour for pleasure, happened to be taken into the court by a friend while the young man's examination was proceeding, and presently Singapore was electrified to hear that Mr Falck had bought up the bankrupt business, and was putting in young Sansom—now satisfactorily whitewashed—as manager. The only reason he gave for his generosity was that he had been so much touched by the youth's efforts to shield his defaulting parent that he felt bound to set him on his legs again. Anxiously Singapore enquired whether this benevolent idiot had any more money to fling away in buying up moribund concerns, and Mr Falck was approached from various unexpected quarters. It was known that he purchased the plant and goodwill of a too ambitious cement-manufacturing company on a neighbouring island, but that was all, though one or two other firms which had been in a bad way were observed to have mysteriously renewed their youth.

That was some years ago. No one thought of Mr Falck as a benevolent idiot now. In those days Singapore had not yet earned the proud title of the Hamburg of the Far East, and the efforts of German merchants to establish themselves were regarded with amused indulgence, as when children are moved to imitate their elders. But if Mr Falck had come to the Straits for pleasure, he had remained there to some purpose. People did not now wonder at his folly in subsidising Sansoms; they wondered what young Sansom paid his father to stop away.

The firm kept its old name, the manager had become managing partner, and besides a full Chinese staff, there were several German clerks. Mr Falck had come upon these compatriots stranded forlornly in different English houses, and in the kindness of his heart had entertained them on divers Teutonic anniversaries. No one could be surprised when, for one excellent reason or another, they quitted the service of their British employers and entered his. It was the most natural thing in the world, and no one thought of objecting, though later on, when certain old customers followed the clerks, there were a few who wondered whether this were purely a coincidence. One of the clerks proved to have been trained as an architect, and simply for the love of the thing, designed for a native ruler, whose acquaintance Mr Falck had made in his tour, a wonderful palace in the Rococo-Arabian Nights or Brighton Pavilion style. Sansoms built the palace, surrounding it with stupendous flights of steps as white and solid-looking as marble, and far less expensive, and from that moment might have added "palaces" to their list of wares. No native prince who respected himself could exist any longer without a Sansom palace. Appropriate furniture and interior decorations were also to be had, nor were suitable equipages neglected. Nowadays—or say five or six years ago—Sansoms would have specialised in showy cars duly provided with chauffeurs of vague nationality but obviously military training, and motor-boats similarly attended, but thirty years ago they could not go beyond highly decorated state-coaches, and fussy little steam-launches masquerading as gondolas and other alien waterfowl. Only one thing was wanting to establish the firm as the real Universal Provider for its mingled *clientèle*, and it was whispered that the lack was merely apparent. There were tiresome British and Dutch Residents to be satisfied before the aspiring native ruler could obtain an absolutely necessary advance, and these gentlemen remained satisfied, as it appeared—but then, so did their charges, which was a highly unusual state of things.

How had Falck managed it all? Singapore wondered, surveying the imposing edifice which had sprung up under its heedless eyes like one of Sansoms' own fairy palaces. How did he manage it? it enquired of him sometimes when in a genial mood—

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Mr Falck was always genial; it was Singapore that began to be a little ruffled—only to be met with platitudes which tended to nettle it the more. Fortune was a capricious mistress, said Mr Falck in his best rhetorical style; the only crime she never forgave was inattention when she proffered her gifts. That this favoured adorer had never thus offended her, Singapore would have testified with one voice.

Singapore in the hollow of his hand, Mr Falck cast about, as Horace Berringer had said, for fresh worlds to conquer—or perhaps it was that he had envisaged the conquest of these further worlds from the first, and had only concentrated his efforts on Singapore as a beginning. Hence it was that young Sansom had been summoned “home” by cable at a moment’s notice, bringing with him a collection—apparently made at random—of trade samples and geological specimens that amused the Customs people hugely, to find himself, like a commercial Lady of Burleigh, inducted into soberly magnificent offices of whose very existence he had been ignorant. Hence also it was that he sat in those offices at this moment, and gazed reproachfully at the sleeping partner whose mandate had brought him hither—a big burly man with a big spreading beard and a big infectious laugh, the kind of man who could only be viewed to full advantage smoking a big meerschaum, with a big tankard of beer at his elbow, after doing justice to a big and excellent dinner. Mr Falck had at length met with a check.

“The expense!” said Mr Sansom, with as much bitterness as he could bring himself to throw into the words. “All this!” he waved a partially closed hand at the sombre walls and massive office furniture. “And bringing me home—first class P. & O., too!” He spoke far more in sorrow than in anger, for he was enjoying himself very thoroughly in London, which was a much more raffish place—in appearance, at any rate—thirty or forty years ago than it is to-day. But Mr Falck’s child-like gaze, and the copybook maxims on which he professedly ruled his life, made it impossible for even his partner to treat him as anything but a big heedless boy, who must be protected against his own extravagant instincts—unnecessary though such protection might be. “Just to hear that this precious Berringer

cub has been fooling us all round! You're in too great a hurry, that's what you are. You tell me you want to get into Bandeir quietly, and I send one of our best men to see how the land lies. He spends a year working himself into old Tournour's good graces—and then you cable all of a sudden that you've found a short cut after all!"

"I know, I know. But, my goot friend, think! To haf the yong Berrincher himself thrown into my arms, as it were! Was there ever such an opportunity for becoming master of Bandeir at one stroke?"

"Was there ever such a waste of money for absolutely no return, pray?" countered Sansom.

"What is money compared with a wound to one's self-esteem?" demanded Mr Falek pathetically.

Mr Sansom was encouraged. "Yes, I don't wonder you feel sore at being fooled by a young chap you thought you had nobbled all right."

"Not fooled—no. The yong fellow had no evil intention. An influence was brought to bear upon him that I had not foreseen—the influence of a very remarkable woman, Sansom."

"Oh, we all know about Mrs Tournour-Durell!" said Sansom impatiently. "The Queen of Bandeir, they call her—spends her life in trying to put things straight when her busybody of a husband has got 'em nicely mixed."

"So?" thoughtfully. "I wish I had known. Yet even then I fear I should have under-estimated her powers."

"Boy's a crank, isn't he?—bit of a coward, too. Last night I fell in with a young chap who knew him at Oxford. Kept my own counsel, as you may guess, but picked his brains a bit. Said Berringer was a jolly quiet chap—precious little to say for himself—never did anything if he could help it. Terrified of ordinary people, he said—lived shut up with a set of oddities like himself who wanted to reform the world."

"Chust so. Yet but for these curious tastes, my Sansom, he would not haf visited Chermany to study our methods of—reforming the worlt." Mr Falek rolled the words out nobly.

"Well, that's all to the good—I'm not saying it isn't. But old Berringer's son—it does make one laugh! I've no reason to be grateful to Sir Gilbert—he hustled my old dad out of Bandeir

with not so much as a dollar to show for the money and the work he'd put into the place—but no one ever called him a coward. I'd give something to be sure that he knows how this chap has turned out."

"This youth is not a coward," said Mr Falck magisterially; "but he thinks he is."

Sansom stared, then laughed. "Oh, well, that's good enough for me. If he thinks he's a coward, he'll behave accordingly."

"That is the question. An over-sensitif mind, a sheltered upbringing—these haf unfitted him for accepting responsibility. And then I, like the Lotos-Eaters of your great poet"—Sansom snorted, apparently resenting the accusation of possessing a poet of any description—"seek to anchor him securely in the uneventful existence to which these incline him, and meet with a gratifying success. But hark! in the person of the gracious Mrs Tournour-Durell, duty thunders very loud 'Thou must!' and the youth replies in a very little voice 'I can!' Decidedly I haf failed through under-estimating the powers of my fair hostess."

"Your hostess? Oh, your landlady, I suppose you mean. That is, your landlady that was to have been, I imagine, for of course the deal's off?"

Mr Falck shook his head wisely. "Never act upon the impulse of the moment, my Sansom. I was tempted to it, I own—to make the lady suffer in her purse for the disappointment she had inflicted on me. But what would haf been the consequence? Would she not haf declared the unknown Falck as bad as she had ever believed him, and congratulated herself the more on withdrawing her nephew from his influence? But I pursue the negociations, I sign the lease—though without committing myself as to the time I expect actually to occupy the house—and with what result? The charming Mrs Tournour-Durell is troubled, remorseful—she fears to haf mischutched me. She is victorious, it becomes her to be magnanimous; hence there will always be a welcome for me in Bandeir should I find myself in the neighbourhood—in the course of a visit to Palbat, for instance."

"Palbat—that's what you're after now, is it?"

"I haf already waited upon the Netherlands Minister, and a concession is in process of being granted."

"You don't let the grass grow under your feet, I must say. But you've made a bad mistake now, let me tell you. Palbat is no good whatever as a rival to Bandeir—I've been there and I know."

Mr Falck was so evidently intended to look crestfallen, that he endeavoured politely to do so. "Yet there are possibilities?" he suggested gently. "And Palbat opens a back door to Bandeir—so?"

"You're a cunning old devil!" with reluctant but whole-hearted admiration. "So that's your way of getting at Berringer now, is it?"

"To mofe my worlt, I must haf a standing-place," Mr Falck spoke apologetically. "Palbat has no good harbour, true; but it can make use of those of Bandeir—by amicable arranchement. It can construct roads, a railway. It can develop areas where the frontier is not, perhaps, quite well defined. It can take advantage of the freedom of trade which the Berrincher boast to create, and satisfy wants that Berrincher policy would scorn to gratify. It has its little private door for occasional use, but throws itself on the chenerosity of its big neighbour to obtain channels for its trade—its visible trade, that is."

"Its visible trade—ha, ha! But all this will be a long business, and I don't see how you are going to get rid of Berringer before he's firmly in the saddle. And when he is—if you're right about his being a chip of the old block after all—you may whistle for Bandeir."

"Patience, patience! Did I not say that the boy believes himself a coward? If not, why does he go out under an assumed name, and not in his own person?"

"Well, I'm blowed! You don't really mean it?"

"If you doubt me, make occasion to examine, as I haf done, the passencher-list of the *Ternate*, in which Mrs Tournneur-Durell's passache has for some time been taken. You will find that Mr Horace Bliss, Singapore for Bandeir, has been fortunate enough to secure a berth unexpectedly left vacant. The name of Berrincher does not appear."

"And what precisely do you make this out to mean?"

"Undoubtedly that the boy, though convinced of his duty, is not sure enough of himself to take it up unreservedly. He may not like it, he may fail in performing it; therefore he leaves himself a loophole by which he may withdraw without a public disgrace, and return to the more congenial task of assisting his friends in elevating the masses by lectures on the æsthetic value of the cauliflower."

Sansom gave a joyous yelp of laughter. "And our business, I take it, is to pack him off back to his æsthetic cauliflowers one time?"

"So. He must not like it. He must fail—publicly if necessary. On no account must he establish himself in his father's place."

"I'm with you—every step of the way. But how—how?"

"That is for you to arrange. We haf our achemt in Bandeir, you tell me. You know the place yourself?"

"Well," said Sansom hesitatingly, "I know *about* it—quite as much as I want to; but not being exactly—what d'y'e call it?—*persona grata* in Bandeir, thanks to Sir Gilbert's grudge against my old dad, I should be a little nervous about showing my face there on a delicate errand. Tourneur is every bit as set on keeping the bad feeling alive, and anything I was mixed up in would make him suspicious at once. Why!" he spoke with a keen sense of injury, "have you forgotten how we were let down over that contract for the river-wall and quays they were talking about? As soon as old Tourneur sees the name of Sansom, off he goes, like a bull from a red rag"—excitement made Sansom slightly confused here—"and will have nothing to do with our tender. Then he goes and noses out some sort of lime and gravel on his own ground, and gives out that he'll do the whole job himself off his own bat. Nice mess he's made of it, too! Three times—the third time is in to-night's paper—those wharves have slid gently into the river, with everything on 'em. He'll be able to build a bridge on the ruins soon, but that's all the good he'll ever do."

"Then he has abandoned his design?"

"Not he! Most pig-headed old beggar you ever saw."

"Then it seems to me we haf a means to our hand, at once to discredit his government and to discourache the yong Ber-

rincher. When I first came to Singapore——” Mr Falck leaned forward and spoke rapidly in a low voice. Sansom listened, chuckled, and finally exploded with mirth.

“Well, you are a *oner!*” he cried, between his paroxysms. “I thought I knew you pretty well, but this is better than I expected. But I say, you know, *mun’s* the word! Not the thing in the East to use the natives against the whites—see? We mustn’t appear in the matter.”

“Why should we? It is a matter of purely native concern. You will work it through the agent you haf mentioned, or any other you consider more suitable, and merely light the fire which is to burn our way into *Bandeir*.”

“Burn our way in? I should think so! But what if it burns us out of other places as well? Fires have a way of spreading, you know.”

“Has any work of Sansoms’ ever collapsed—yet? When it does, you and I, my friend, will be far away, enchoying the fruits of our labours in peaceful retirement.”

“If only it don’t occur to any one to connect us with what happens—— Oh, we must risk it, I see that, though it’s a big risk. But I thought I understood you had a hold on young Berringer that was to keep him bound to you through thick and thin?”

There was distinct *hanteur* in Mr Falck’s voice as he answered. “I may haf been mistaken. Or I may haf considered the prize at which you hint too valuable to stake against a comparatively small gain. Whatever the reason, it is entirely my own concern, Mr Sansom.”

“Oh, of course, of course!” Sansom assured him in a great hurry. He was conscious of resenting strongly his partner’s marked relegation of him to the sphere of business, but this was evidently not the moment for a jocular demand to be admitted to Mr Falck’s family circle, and introduced to his daughter, such as in moments of expansion he felt himself quite prepared to put forward. “What I was going to say”——he hurried on awkwardly——“was that I think you are making a big mistake in having that queer girl——Miss Cording or whatever her name is——to keep Miss Falck company. It’s purely as a matter of business I mention it, of course,” hastily, “but she’s English to the

backbone, and English official too—you can tell that at a glance—and we know she's hand in glove with Mrs Tourneur-Durell. Well, if our affairs get talked about in that quarter——”

Mr Falck allowed himself the luxury of a smile. If Sansom was really trying to oust Melifred from her post, his methods were crude, but perhaps his intention was merely to insinuate a doubt by way of defending himself in advance, should his partner come to learn of something that had occurred that morning. But Mr Falck kept close guard over his daughter, and though he had only been able to snatch five minutes for his lunch, he had already received Melifred's report of an early visit from Mr Sansom, who had desired urgently to see Miss Falck, since he found her father was out. It was Melifred who received him—feeling devoutly thankful that nothing had happened to disturb Erna's preconceived idea that Mr Falck's partner was somewhere about his own age—and sent him away with his desire ungratified. Mrs Tourneur-Durell's account of the elder Sansom's part in the founding of Bandeir had not predisposed her to like his son, and she liked him still less when he tried in vain by vague promises and definite cajolery to induce her to give way. When her assurances that she was there to spare Miss Falck any business discussions failed to draw from him the nature of his errand, she had at last in desperation rung for the waiter to show him out with his tale untold, and for this her employer had highly commended her. No one knew better than he did that even if Sansom had not succeeded in penetrating into the girls' sitting-room, had the conversation continued, it would have been a marvel if curiosity had not drawn Erna out of it, and he meant to teach his partner a lesson.

“I know well that Miss Corvin is English to the backbone, and what you in the East call a *sahib*,” he said placidly. “It is for that I haf her in my house. Not merely as companion to my daughter”—he waved a hand airily—“but to reflect to me the opinions of her class. In her I view them as in a diminishing mirror. But”—as Sansom, a good deal bewildered, was trying to discern his meaning—“I haf those papers I spoke of to gif you. Walk with me as far as the hotel, and you shall haf them.” He smiled pleasantly as he turned away, for he read a delighted hope in Sansom's eyes.

Erna and Melifred had a visitor in their sitting-room that afternoon whose prompt admission—by Mr Falck's express orders—would have moved the envy of Mr Falck's partner. With a disregarded teacup in his hands, Horace Berringer sat leaning forward, his eyes fixed in dumb adoration on the fairy form of his beloved. Melifred was wont to wonder impatiently how it was that a girl so essentially mundane as Erna Falck managed to impress every man who came near her as so otherworldly fragile that a breath would blow her away. But Melifred was in the position of the traditional valet, and was prejudiced because she knew too much. Others were more fortunate. She had seen the brazen assurance of a Prussian officer fade into something resembling reverence when he was presented to Erna—then what wonder that a shy Englishman's genuine reverence for women should deepen into veneration? At any rate, though Melifred would have liked to shake the adorer, Erna appreciated his homage. She looked really angelic this afternoon as she basked in his enraptured gaze, her draperies of white and silver and palest blue falling mistily about her. Those were the days when every woman was firmly buttoned up in a "jacket bodice" as stiff and tight as rigorous compression and much boning could make it, with a hard high collar, and sleeves of such economical cut that she could not lift her arms. Erna hated the tight bodice, because she knew it did not suit her, but it was the thing to be neat and trim and smart, and as long as she was in Germany there was nothing better to aspire to. But she had extracted from young Berringer some account of the tenets of his æsthetic friends, and when she came to England she made straight for the shop which might be called the property-room of the æsthetic movement. Tea-gowns were just coming in, and though Englishwomen still regarded them as adventurous and verging on the improper, Erna, free from British prejudice, seized upon the fashion with joy. It was a tea-gown she was wearing now, with massive silver embroidery decorating the loose girdle and square-cut yoke, from which her lovely little head rose daintily. Her eyes were of the appealing grey-blue of a kitten's, and with all the guilelessness and wonder seen there or in the portrait of Countess Potocka in the Dresden Gallery, and if—like all the girls of her day—she wore a curled fringe, it

was so treated that it was no more a fringe but a halo, an aureole of golden mist about the white brow. Melifred, faithful to her task of keeping Miss Falek in countenance, wore a tea-gown too, but hers was an uncompromising garment of dark terra-cotta velveteen, which took on the air of an academic robe, and made her look even more severe than usual. Her expression of intense disapproval as she put exactly the right amount of sugar and cream into Erna's second cup of tea might have caused amusement had there been any one present with eyes to see it—which her two companions had not.

"I—am—so—dreadfully—disappointed!" Erna was saying, putting a deeper depth of reproachful misery into each successive word, and looking at the young man with eyes that said he was the last person in the world she could have expected to disappoint her. "You told me you would come to stay with us in the winter, and skate with us, and teach me to hunt." Association with English schoolfellows in Switzerland had succeeded in eradicating any trace of German accent, but not in making Erna as English as she fondly believed herself.

Melifred laughed shortly. "My dear Erna, hunting is not taught; it comes by nature. Nobody—Mr Berringer or anybody else—could teach you to follow the hounds."

"You *would* teach me—wouldn't you?" Erna appealed with pathetic confidence to Horace.

"Of course I would—I would do anything in the world you asked me——"

"Except hand her her tea," interrupted Melifred, and had to rescue table, tray, and tea-set from his impetuous spring to apologize and seize the offered cup. Fortunately his own tea was the only thing that suffered, and since he declared confusedly that he preferred it cold, Melifred poured it back into the cup from the sancer and restored it to him. Erna was awaiting impatiently the restitution of order.

"You say you would do anything for me, but you won't do the one thing I want"—the blue-grey eyes were exactly those of a disappointed kitten—"and it spoils everything, for Papa says his business arrangements are so disturbed he may have to go back——"

"Erna!" said Melifred sharply, vigilant for her employer's interests. Erna pouted.

"And it's my first visit to England!" she persisted dolefully.

"It's the one thing I want, too," he responded, with equal unhappiness; "but when a thing *can't* be done, you know—when a thing's a duty—— Why, you yourself——"

"After all you have said, you are going to rob me of all the pleasure I have been looking forward to—because of your *aunt*! You do what she tells you, and you don't care about me."

"I do care—most awfully; you know I do. Only—I couldn't help knowing what my aunt said was true, you know. If I hadn't done it, you yourself would have had a right to despise me. *You* see what I mean?" he turned despairingly to Melifred for support.

"Of course I do. I should have despised you horribly," she assured him. Erna resented alike appeal and response.

"Well, *I* should have respected you. I should have known that all your promises meant something." She rose with dignity, and moved away to the window like an offended angel, her long winglike sleeves floating after her. "You can talk to Milly, as you are so anxious to please her. What a pity your aunt is not here!"

The desolation which overspread the young man's visage made even Melifred pity him. "Come back, Erna!" she said impatiently. "If you sit by the open window in that dress you will be sure to catch cold—and then your nose will be red," she added in a whisper as she pursued Erna to her refuge.

Erna hunched one shoulder rebelliously—well out of Horace Berringer's sight. "I don't mind if I do catch cold," she announced—less for Melifred's benefit than his. "I know it is silly of me, but I can't *bear* to be disappointed in people—especially when it's a friend."

"Well, you had no business to be disappointed." Pathos on Erna's part, so Melifred realised with shame—always brought out the very worst side of her own nature. Moreover, she was anxious to bring the fit of petulance to a close—not only because Mr Falck might come in at any moment, but because she had a dreadful fear that Horace Berringer might succumb to Erna's

pleading, and go back on his resolve. He was standing up now, not daring to approach her, but following her every movement with miserable eyes. Her back was resolutely turned to him.

"Oh, look!" she exclaimed suddenly, "there is Papa! And who is that with him? Milly, I believe it is the good-looking dark man who got out of the hansom this morning, who I said I felt was coming up here."

"The only person who came this morning was Mr Sansom on business, as you know perfectly well," said Melifred. "You seem to forget there are other people in the hotel."

"Well, he is coming now, at any rate," said Erna contentedly, and preened herself like a little bird—giving a pull here and a touch there to her draperies. "And he will think we have all quarrelled and retired to separate corners!" her laugh trilled forth gaily as she returned to her place and deliberately took up Horace Berringer's cup. He could not pass from grave to gay as quickly as she could, and she had to raise the cup to her lips with an arch glance over it at him, before he could spring forward in horrified apology. Then there was confused explanation and merry disclaimer, and a pretty soft laugh filling in the pauses—together making such a pleasant buzz of sound as Mr Falck approved highly when he brought Sansom into the outer room, like a Peri permitted to listen to the songs of Paradise. But he had not bargained for the sudden opening of the door, just as the younger man was reluctantly departing with his papers, and the appearance on the threshold of a radiant vision which chode him affectionately for not coming to tea.

"Run away, little love! Business—Mr Sansom is chust departing!" he called quickly—it was the first time either his daughter or Sansom had seen him at a loss—and he fairly hustled his partner out into the corridor, though not until a glance had passed of mutual appraisement and approval.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KING IN DISGUISE.

If the untoward fate of the river-wall at Bandeir moved the younger Sansom to unholy joy, there was one person to whom it was a tragedy. When Peter Tournour-Durell—still called Peter Tournour by his intimates save on official occasions—stood contemplating the scene of devastation, the iron entered into his soul. As Sansom said, it was the third time the thing had happened. Still possessed of the same explosive energy as of old—perhaps it was this that kept him absurdly young-looking to be the father of two grown-up sons, so considered, at any rate, by themselves—he cherished also the same pathetic belief that any man of ordinary brains could make a success of anything simply by putting his back into it. Therefore the desire of the abhorred firm of Sansoms to undertake the work—already attempted in vain more than once—of replacing the swampy foreshore on the Government House side of the river by a continuous quay-wall which would afford much-needed additional space for buildings and improved landing accommodation, came to him as a challenge. He studied the subject in such books as he could get hold of, visited various European settlements—principally Dutch, it must be confessed—in which similar works had been carried out, and happy in the knowledge that the requisite materials were to be found in the state itself, and could easily be brought down the river, plunged into his task. It was just completed, and the people of Bandeir were making holiday—any excuse serves for holiday-making in Bandeir—to visit and comment upon it with mingled wonder at the extraordinary achievements of the white man and regret for the old state of

things, when a particularly mild earthquake shock sent it, in Sansom's words, sliding gently into the river. Presumably the foundations had been too weak to support the superstructure, and Peter set his teeth and began again.

This time his work survived its completion for fully two months, and even the people were beginning to be reconciled to it, when the river came down in flood, and the powerful current, scouring out the soil from the muddy bed, carried away such large portions of the wall that the only thing to do was to rebuild it altogether. It was in face of much opposition from chiefs and people that this was done, for whether they talked about Kismet or about spirits guarding the river bank, all were convinced it had been made quite clear that the enterprise was not to prosper. It seemed, however, that perseverance was to be rewarded at last, and after six months' use of the new quay Peter had written home jubilantly to his wife that at last she would find he had a landing-stage fit for her to set foot upon. Less than a month later there came a typhoon—the worst ever known; they always are—and the next morning Peter stood amid a waste of concrete blocks of all sizes and fantastic shapes, about which the water lapped, while twisted iron girders protruded here and there like wounded serpents petrified as they writhed. He had been up all night saving life, for though the lightly built houses could be unroofed, and even carried away bodily, without serious damage to any one, there was always the danger that fire might break out, and the collapse of the river-wall had led also to the inundation of a good part of the town. His white drill clothes were torn and dirty, the battered helmet which his Chinese boy had pressed upon him—following him about till he took it—as soon as the sun rose, was rakishly askew, but unyielding resolution was in every line of his broad-shouldered figure as he stood with hands dug deep into his pockets. The resolution was recognised and deplored by a little group of chiefs of high rank who watched him from the nearest piece of level ground. They had come to condole with their ruler in his misfortune—a duty in which they shone much more conspicuously than in putting their shoulders to the wheel either to avert or to repair misfortune—and they saw before them the cheerless prospect of more, and probably harder, hard

work. They themselves would not work, of course, but it would fall to them to provide those who would, and keep them up to the mark, and this in itself was fatiguing in the extreme. No one cared to draw the Wazir's wrath upon himself by uttering an audible protest, but they conversed with hands and eyes and boding whispers, and were happily conscious of complete mutual agreement.

"Oh, hard luck, Peter—hard luck!" Peter turned sharply, to see the Bishop of Bandeir—who was in a way his brother-in-law, since Berringers, Tourneurs, and Donnellans were all inextricably mixed by marriage—clambering perilously over the wreckage to reach him. Having helped to rescue the remains of his printing-press from the ruins of the State Registrar's house at the foot of Mission Hill, whither it had been carried by the storm, and left his son to superintend the collection of the fragments of the Cathedral roof, so far as they could be traced, Bishop Donnellan had crossed the river to ascertain how the official, business, and native quarters of the town had fared. The natural human sympathy of his comment on the piteous spectacle before him warmed Peter's heart, but unfortunately some evil genius prompted the Bishop to improve the occasion.

"You have made a gallant fight," he said, speaking, perhaps unconsciously, in Malay, and loud enough to be heard by the group of chiefs on the shore, "but it's pretty clear now that the thing is hopeless. It's some satisfaction to be sure of it."

"The Tuan Padri Sahib is right," broke in the senior chief, with indecent haste. "Clearly it is written that the shore is to remain bare as of old, that the fishermen may build their houses in the water."

"Not a bit of it!" snapped Peter. "What is written is that no house is to be built nearer the river than the line I drew five years ago, to which you all agreed."

"Who are we to oppose the will of Tuan Pitah? But even he cannot strive against that which is ordained. See, Tuan, why not build your beautiful white pathway on the other side of the river?"

"Because I am not a fool!" It was one of Peter's sorest trials that the chiefs could never recognise that his project had anything but ostentation in view. Across the river the cliff of

Mission Hill rose sheer, and would have required a lift or a Jacob's-ladder to scale it from the water's edge, but what did it signify to the Malay mind that there would be no space for warehouses or business premises of any kind?

"At any rate," said another chief, anxious to soothe the ruler's rising wrath while supporting his fellow, "there can be no doubt that the spirits will not permit you to build on this side, Tuan. Three times you have defied them, and each time evil has come of it. Be content, for it is not for man to contend with the spirits."

Peter turned on them savagely. "Haven't you learnt yet that when the white man contends with the spirits he wins?" he demanded. "Certainly you have forgotten Datu Berringer, for none of you would have dared to say that to him."

"The magic of Datu Briuja was stronger than the spirits of the river and the jungle. For other men there is only one way of appeasing their hostility." The speaker's voice was low and hurried, and he looked askance at Peter as though deprecating his wrath. An awful glance met him.

"Enough! Such talk is forbidden," said the Wazir with stern finality, and turned his back on the group. "What on earth possessed you to start them on the spirit tack?" he demanded angrily in English of the Bishop. "You ought to know by this time that the only thing now is to go ahead and beat the spirits, whatever it costs. I tell you"—he brought down one fist heavily into the opposite palm—"I'll build this quay, and build it to last, if I have to go on building——"

"Hash, Peter—stop!" Thoughts of Vanderdecken were in the Bishop's mind. Peter neither contradicted nor corroborated them.

"If I have to go on building to my dying day!" he concluded, and turning to the chiefs, repeated the sentence in Malay. They went away shaking their heads and exchanging awed whispers, and the Wazir and the Bishop walked through the town to estimate the extent of the damage done, and stimulate the owners of the wrecked property to take other steps towards reconstruction than holding receptions of condoling friends among the ruins.

Apparently the opposition he had met with stirred Peter to

even increased activity, for gangs of native and Chinese coolies were already swarming like ants over the wilderness of broken concrete when the Bishop looked across the river the next morning, and the work of clearing the site proceeded without intermission. As his own architect, Peter had several new ideas to put into operation for breaking the force of the current, lessening the strain on the most exposed portions of the wall, and so on, and the work occupied all the time and thought he could spare from his main task of governing for his absent nephew. He would slip away between tedious sessions of the Council to refresh himself with marking the progress made, and in this congenial business the Bishop found him engrossed one morning when his boat brought him across. A mail had arrived the day before, and European Bandeir, after an ecstatic evening of reading its letters, and a night spent in digesting them, was eager to exchange its home news with its fellows.

"Well, Peter, so we shall have Rosamond with us again in another month!" cried the Bishop cheerily. "She writes to Agnes that she was able to take her passage by the *Temate* after all."

"Oh yes—Rosamond—awfully jolly!" said Peter vaguely, turning a preoccupied face upon him. The lack of response was so extraordinary in the man who was popularly supposed, whenever his wife was away, to share the piteous sensations of a homeless dog, that the Bishop was thunderstruck. "Is anything wrong? Have you had later news?" he hastened to ask, with a searching glance.

"Don't know the date of yours. I've had rather an eye-opener, that's all. Wrong? Well, that depends. Hanged if I know!"

"Nothing about Rosamond, then? Something unexpected? Peter! is Gilbert's boy coming out at last?"

"Now what in the world made you think of that? Got it in one, Bishop. Horatio Berringer, Esquire, does deign to intend shedding the light of his countenance on the subjects he has left to take care of themselves for so long."

"But surely you are glad? We have so often said—— Oh, I see, you would rather he didn't arrive until all this building work was finished? But surely it is just as well that he should see

something of the difficulties you have had to face? And everything is going on well, isn't it?"

"First-rate. I think we've diddled the spirits this time," said Peter complacently. Then his tone changed again. "Not that anything *I* do counts here. I'm not a Berringer."

"Oh, nonsense! You're a Berringer by adoption, if any one ever was." The Bishop was determined to offer consolation, though puzzled that it should be needed. "And you know as well as I do that it will be the proudest day of your life when you hand over Bandeir to young Horatio, and take up your position behind the throne instead of on it. What a *tamasha* we'll have the day he gets here! Let me see——"

"No, you won't," said Peter peremptorily. "Oh, you needn't look at me as if I had gone mad, or turned traitor, or something. The boy is coming incog., my good sir—under a false name. Junior Cadet Horace Bliss, Bandeir Government Service, if you please!"

"Stuff, Peter! If you ain't mad, he must be."

"I wish I was! But you'll accept Rosamond as sane, I suppose? She puts the best face she can on it—bless her heart!—writes as nicely as possible that he seems painfully conscious of his disabilities, and is anxious to prove himself and win his spurs before he steps into his father's place. Not much room for misconception there, is there?"

"But she may have mistaken him?" suggested the Bishop, without much hope.

"Not she! I've got a letter from my lord himself as well. Lays down his conditions—no one to know who he is besides myself but you and Agnes—it seems Rosamond insisted on that—not even Charley and Albinia"—the very capable son and daughter who assisted the Bishop and his wife in the multifarious work of the Mission—"and no one is to presume to expostulate with him on the subject. Very much Berringer of Bandeir, you see. But the worst of it is that all this farce is not simply a preparation for taking his proper place. What he wants to do is to see how he likes it before he commits himself, and sneak away unrecognised if things don't suit him. What d'ye think of that, pray?"

"I think—I trust—you are judging him too hardly," said the

Bishop, with emotion. "I told you of his extreme diffidence when I wrote from home to say I did not think he was being educated in quite the right way for what was before him——"

"And I wrote begging and praying Charles to send him out at once, that we might make a man of him here where his duty lay, and he sent me a letter dictated by Theodosia to say that they were his guardians and meant to fulfil their trust!" burst forth Peter. "Why didn't I go home and kidnap him?"

"Well, at any rate, we will hope he will recognise his duty when he sees it. His parents' son could hardly do otherwise."

"His parents' son—ah, there you are! Gilbert's son to disgrace his father like this! It's Lettice all over. It's her fault."

"You never did your sister justice, Peter, but the remembrance of how she died should surely make you fair to her now. If Lettice's boy inherits her conscientiousness, he will do well."

"That's all right, but what about this mad idea?" grumbled Peter, subdued but still resentful. "You don't seem to see the full"—he sought wildly for a word, and ended by inventing one—"the full *preposterousness* of it. What do you imagine will be the effect on the people?"

"But surely they won't know who he is?"

"If you think that all the chiefs and people who adored Gilbert like a god, and the women who used to spend hours sitting round the room and staring at Lettice, won't twig their son when they see him, I don't agree with you. Oh, they won't let on—no fear of that! The thing is that they will never, never, never believe that I know!"

"Peter, what can you mean?"

"Why, it's perfectly simple. You'll agree that to them it would seem absolutely natural that the rightful heir should come back in disguise to see how the country is getting on under his wicked uncle's care—underlying idea of half their tales, ain't it?" The Bishop nodded. "Well, but is the rightful heir ever such a consummate idiot as to tell the wicked uncle of his intention beforehand? Of course not—not such a fool! So don't you see that whoever twigs the truth will immediately feel himself in a conspiracy with Datu Berringer's son to restore him to his rights and baffle the wicked usurper—

me? I tell you it'll be lucky if Rosamond and I are not murdered in our beds out of pure disinterested anxiety to give the king his own again!"

"Write out the truth and seal it up, and entrust it to a committee of the chiefs for safe-keeping until you ask for it," suggested the Bishop.

"I like that! when you know as well as I do that when the paper was opened they would immediately say I had used magic to make it read as I wished."

"Then what are we to do? We must not risk Rosamond's safety."

"Mine being immaterial? Thanks awfully! All the same, I fancy Rosamond will choose to throw in her lot with me still—eh? Do?—oh, of course the dodge will be to have everything so smooth, by hook or by crook, that in the shortest possible time the youth will leap to the conclusion that there's a nice soft job waiting for him, and be glad to take it."

"And how will you manage that?"

"Well, he seems keen on going up-country—says twice over in his letter that he wants to try life in the jungle—been reading novels or poetry or something, I suppose. So what about making him Resident at Peveril after a bit? Fine scenery, no people, can't get into mischief—bore him to death in a couple of weeks—eh?"

"I really think you *are* a wicked uncle, Peter!" said the Bishop, laughing; and Peter, his good humour restored by the picture he had conjured up, laughed too.

It was an error of judgment on Peter's part to send the *Star of Hope* to Singapore to fetch his wife and nephew. The first vessel to be constructed under Sir Gilbert's auspices in the dock-yard he established, she had served as the ruler's private yacht all her life. But she was an old boat by this time, and as on intermediate trips she carried everything that wanted carrying—from coal to coolies—her internal condition, like her external, was by no means up to Navy standard. It was not, however, the thought of her cramped cabins and permanently dingy decks that made Mrs Tourneur-Durell wish, when the captain waited

upon her at the hotel to ask when she would be pleased to sail, that she had begged Peter to send one of the less pretentious vessels of later build. She remembered—and when they went on board she saw that Horace remembered too—that the *Star of Hope* was the scene of the tragedy which had darkened his life. She saw his eyes change as he reached the deck, saw the hunted look with which he scanned the narrow space bounded by the blue sea whose glittering filled him with a very horror of reminiscence, and hated herself that she had not thought to spare him this ordeal. Peter, of course, could not be expected to think of such a thing, though he had with grim humour provided that his nephew should enjoy the precise accommodation befitting the newest cadet in the Bander Service. The state cabin, such as it was, which would have been sacred to him had he appeared in his proper person, was naturally allotted to his aunt, but there were two other fairly good rooms, and these were both locked up. The cabin assigned to Mr Bliss was next to the steward's store-room—a fact of which the occupant did not at first realise the full meaning, though Mrs Tourneur-Durell did. Her first impulse was to have one of the other cabins broken open—the keys had somehow been left at Bander—but the sight of that look in Horace's eyes made her decide that possibly Peter had acted more kindly than he knew.

They sat on deck late that first evening out from Singapore, for Horace was conscious of extreme reluctance to face the spectres of his mind in solitude. Yet he would not sleep on deck, as his aunt suggested, for he felt sure that the moment he closed his eyes he would see nothing but that scene of long ago. In the darkness of his cabin, stifling though it might be, there was at least nothing to recall the past. But there proved to be a great deal that was disagreeable in the present. A wavering look about the floor—for which neither the motion of the vessel nor the flickering of the oil-lamp was sufficient to account—turned out to be due to the hasty movements of a host of cockroaches, whose anxiety to get out of the way was so great as to forbid their doing it. When Horace hung up the lamp before taking vigorous measures to deal with them as they scurried hither and thither, something hard and winged hit him

in the face, and revealed itself on examination as merely one cockroach out of many that preferred the wall or ceiling to the floor. Arming himself with a stout pair of boots instead of his slippers, he proceeded to effect a clearance, until the heat of the cabin and his own activities combined to make him sit down panting on his bed. Almost immediately, as though at a signal, he became aware of bright sharp eyes in one corner and another, and conversation that passed in agitated squeaks; and the mystery of the extraordinary noise made by the cockroaches as they tried to efface themselves was solved. The cabin held also much larger and heavier occupants. Turning sharply at a movement close to his elbow, Horace beheld a large rat sitting upright on his pillow, and regarding him with an expression of interest mingled with injury. Evidently he was an intruder, and the rat had not yet made up its mind whether he would be good to eat. He threw the handkerchief with which he had been wiping his face at the watcher, which vanished with a resentful squeak—only to reappear the next moment on the washstand. The rest of the rats, though equally interested, were more timid, and remained in their corners, but Horace knew without any telling that this was only while the lamp was alight. The moment it went out, they would be frisking over the bed, and investigating him to their hearts' content. He looked anxiously at the lamp; it would not burn more than another quarter of an hour. Even if he roused the Chinese steward and demanded more oil, he could not spend the night in replenishing his lamp, while it was obviously impossible to sleep without a light. He must take his mattress on deck after all, and he threw off his boots—only to discover that a considerable number of cockroaches had found refuge in his slippers. Having disposed of these intruders, he extricated in a gingerly way from the bunk the thin hard mattress—gingerly because a fresh rushing and scampering showed that the bunk afforded shelter to many occupants for whom it was not intended—banged it furiously against the doorpost by way of purification, and pushing aside the curtain—from which two or three brown bodies fell with a fat thud on his sleeve—made one bound for the companion. At its head he stopped, horror-stricken. The

varied experiences of the last few minutes had banished utterly from his mind the memories he had feared to recall, but now they rushed upon him in a flood at the sight of the still forms which lay all along one side of the deck. A moment's reflection assured him that it was merely the crew, sleeping, as was their wont, where deckhouse or awning would shelter them from the deleterious influences of the moon. Behind and above him was the little tent, pitched on the roof of the state cabin, where his aunt slept with her faithful Chinese maid at her feet—as his mother had been wont to sleep on that voyage so long ago. A quick rustle at the foot of the steps leading to the poop made him look round, to meet the glittering eyes of the old Malay who slept there, charged with the care of Mrs Tourneur-Durell's safety, and who had been awakened by the young man's hasty movements.

"It is nothing. Lie down again. The cabin was too hot." The Malay phrases came naturally to Horace's lips, and the old man grunted and settled himself afresh. The mate, who might or might not have been keeping watch, sauntered aft and looked at the passenger making himself comfortable.

"Or a bit too full of live stock—eh?" he asked with a subdued chuckle. "But I say, where did you pick up the lingo? Not at home, I bet."

"I was born in these seas," said Horace laconically.

"Quite a Mother Carey's chicken!" was the irreverent response, and Horace was conscious of a most unphilosophic yearning to crush the cheerful youth by revealing to him who it was that he was rashly chaffing. He lay fuming for a little while, watching the mate's broad shoulders silhouetted against the starry sky as he picked his way forward again, and then began to realise that from first setting foot on the *Hope's* deck, he had re-entered a forgotten world. During the voyage out from England he had studied Malay diligently under his aunt's tuition, with a grammar and reading-book, repelling all her invitations to try conversation with the assurance that he had forgotten every word he had ever known. But now the Malay words started up again in his mind—names for parts of the ship, sailor phrases, sentences of everyday use—and he wondered

whether he would be able to understand as well as speak. Insensibly he fell asleep, with the first of his two spectres not so much conquered as evaded, and woke in the morning to find himself confronted by the Chinese steward holding out accusingly the remains of what had been a pair of boots. The rats had not gone without a meal, after all.

CHAPTER V.

THE MANNER OF THE KINGDOM.

THE turbid current of the Bandeir River, with the jungle dipping into it on either hand, and the fishermen's *prahus* which wormed their way out from indistinguishable creeks to greet the schooner, awoke familiar memories in Horace, and so did the state barge in which his uncle came down from the capital. But there was something missing from the barge, though what it was he did not realise until his aunt indicated among the crowd of attendants on her deck an elderly man carrying a very large rolled-up umbrella in a case. That gilded umbrella had always been carried over his father's head, and on his death was furled until Sir Gilbert's son should take the place that was his by right. Horace was rather touched by this further proof of the jealousy with which his rights were guarded, but tenderness of feeling was decidedly at a discount in his uncle's presence. Peter Tournear had been perfecting his plan for dealing with his nephew, and had determined not merely to show him how soft a job was awaiting him, but also what a fool he was not to step into it at once. If he would be a cadet, a cadet he should be, and should learn by experience what very small potatoes a newly-joined cadet was. Therefore his greeting was curt and his survey critical, and he drew his wife away after the first word or two. The onlookers saw nothing strange in his brusqueness, any more than in Mrs Tournear-Durell's determined effort a few minutes later to bring the young man into the conversation again, for both were characteristic. But Horace was grateful for her kindness, and resented his uncle's treatment less than he would have done before he was made to

realise the state of affairs. He found entertainment enough in watching the panorama unfolded on either hand as the barge glided swiftly up the river, with the double help of tide and paddles, and in identifying various landmarks which he had absolutely forgotten, but which came to mind now like the scenery of a long-past dream.

"How few people there seem to be about!" said Mrs Tourneur-Durell in a puzzled voice when they had passed the Narrows and were nearing the town. "And have they left off coming to the bank to salute when the barge passes? They look as if they were all trying to hide."

"Why, so they do!" said her husband, looking perplexedly at the group of houses they were passing, where not a creature was now to be seen. "Let me see; I suppose it was the same as I came down this morning, but I went up as far as the boat-station yesterday, and everybody swarmed to the bank as usual."

"Some one may have died in that fishing village, of course"—she supplied her own explanation. "Yes, that must be it, for here come the boats, just as they always do."

But things were not quite as usual, as she saw very quickly. The crowd of light craft, paddled by men and boys and children of all ages, hailed the barge with shouts of welcome, and parted so as to form a guard of honour on either side, but its members did not dash hither and thither, like pink and green and orange dragon-flies, as they generally did. They kept together, and the rash youths who were wont to court disaster by cutting across the stream immediately in front of the barge were recalled by a universal shout the moment they began to forge ahead of the rest, and what was more, obeyed it.

"Have you been drilling them?" she asked, smiling, of her husband.

"Not I. Something else to do. But I never saw them so well behaved before. Blest if I know what's up."

"Well, it's a relief not to be harrowed by the sight of overturned boats and urchins swimming for their lives!" she said, and forgot the matter in the excitement of meeting the Mission boat and greeting the Donnellan family. The new cadet was duly called up to be presented, and while he perceived an amused

twinkle in the eye of the Bishop, realised speedily that he was in the deepest disfavour with his aunt Agnes, Mrs Donnellan. Indeed, her reception of him expressed so plainly the strongest moral reprobation, that her son and daughter were moved by sheer pity to try and make amends to the newcomer. They took kindly possession of him, asked the obvious questions about the voyage and his first impressions of Bandeir, and were clearly wondering how Mrs Tourneur-Durell had contrived to light upon such a hopeless creature, and what good she expected him to do when she engineered his entrance into the Service. When the two boats parted again, Horace overheard Charley Donnellan chaffing his mother on her unbending attitude towards the hapless griffin, and caught her answer, "My dear Charles, you must bear with me. I am one of those people who—unfortunately, no doubt—are unable to feign what they don't feel." Which appeared to be one of the things so apparent as not to need saying.

A temporary landing-stage of bamboo admitted the travellers to the grounds of Government House, where all the servants were waiting to greet Mrs Tourneur-Durell. Chinese, Malays, Indians—the motley throng seemed to divide itself automatically, presenting its salutations through the head servant in each department. Last of all came a curious old creature who had no one to speak for her, and would have indignantly rejected any such attempt to interfere with her right of personal access to the rulers. She was a woman belonging to one of the tribes of the interior, rescued from slavery by Sir Gilbert Berringer in a punitive expedition following on a pirate raid. Every other member of her family had been killed, and she naturally felt that she had a claim upon her benefactor for life. Since she refused to be taken back to her own country, and it would have been cruelty to pitchfork her into a strange tribe, she was allowed to help in the gardens, but developed for herself a quite unexpected form of usefulness as intermediary with the tribes. Nothing allayed the suspicions and calmed the fears of the wild men, spying distrustfully into the ways of the alien ruler, so readily as to find one of their own race installed in his very household, in a position the importance of which it was only human nature to magnify out of all recognition. Many mis-

understandings had been cleared up through a solitary emissary's making his timid way to his countrywoman's house, so that the old lady—very old now—was one of the pillars of the state. Vested in the long decorated coat worn by her people on occasions of ceremony to supplement the inadequacy of their ordinary attire, old Dakai came forward now to smell Rosamond Tourneur-Durell's hand affectionately, and rub it over her face. Horace was just behind his aunt, and found his hand seized in turn. The process was familiar of old, and he submitted readily enough; but when the old woman rose suddenly from her crouching position, and making a funnel of her hands, proceeded to inhale his breath with every appearance of delight, his dismayed look drew a tremendous laugh from his uncle.

"Old Dakai has taken a fancy to you, Horace," said his aunt, smiling, as she passed on to meet the chiefs who were waiting to greet her. But she had a presentiment that the unusual warmth of the salutation meant something more, and the suspicion was confirmed as soon as she was alone with her Chinese maid, who—having been at Bedinghurst during his visit—was necessarily in the secret of Horace's identity.

"Watchee Mem t'inking?" asked Amelia, with a smile of anticipatory interest. "Dakai telling Tuan Balisi si-melling allee samee Datu Blinja."

"Then she guesses?" said her mistress, in dismay. "How very unfortunate! Will she talk about it, do you think?"

"She no telling Malay man; no liking," said Amelia, with assurance.

"But you think she will tell the tribes? Then she must be told to say nothing. Mr Berringer would be very much displeased—— And yet, if she is not quite certain, to make a fuss will only show her there is something in it. Just drop a gentle hint without arousing her suspicions—will you, Amelia?"

"Can do, Mem," was the reassuring reply. "I telling, 'Datu Blinja coming number one house one time, Tuan Balisi no coming.' She savey."

Rosamond could only hope that the proof which seemed so obvious to Amelia might appeal equally to the old woman, but she felt doubtful. She herself had suggested in a letter to her

husband that their nephew should take up his abode at Government House with them, but she saw now that this would have been to give away the secret at once. Not this, however, was Peter's reason for scouting the idea, but his determination to make Horace feel the disabilities of his wilful course to the full. If he had chosen to take his proper place at Government House as Datu, there were the rooms sacred to the memory of his parents, and never used since their death even in times of greatest pressure, ready for him to step into, and his uncle and aunt would gladly move out into other quarters, but not if he persisted in coming to Bandeir as a cadet. The proper place for a cadet—newly joined or on leave from up-country—was the chummary known as the Griffins' Den, where the young gentlemen were housed while they obtained such an elementary knowledge of Malay and of the niceties of behaviour in Jhalabor as might qualify them to take the position of assistant, or "learn-pidgin," to a senior district officer. In this hilarious abode Horace felt it his duty to do his best to settle down—which was the very thing its inmates were determined he should not do. Custom prescribed a very heavy yoke for the neck of the latest arrival, and it was by no means lightened when Horace was discovered to be a good deal older than his immediate seniors in the Service, and a 'Varsity man. Sir Gilbert Beringer's fancy for selecting sailors as his assistants whenever possible was naturally inherited by Peter Tournour, who had himself begun life in the Merchant Marine, and he kept an eye open in his visits to Singapore for dashing young second mates who were sick of the sea, but felt that they had it in them to make a success on shore. Long experience had taught him that the love of the "dog's life" they had left was certain to recur after a time, but slight cases could be treated by a transfer from a hill to a river district, where the Resident must needs be practically amphibious, and the more severe by putting the sufferer in command of one of the Government schooners for a year or two.

Among these lively youths, with their freemasonry of phrase and experience, Horace found himself isolated indeed. His slight seniority—in years, not in rank—his melancholy eyes, and his old-maidish ways, marked him out inevitably as the

general butt. He seemed to have nothing in common with them; they were so very different from his College friends, with their absorbing, if duly languid, interest in art, and their desire to communicate—even at considerable personal inconvenience—the principles of the æsthetic movement to their country-people generally. Really his new associates were more like the audiences that could sometimes be got together in East London to hear the apostles of the new cult—audiences who came to scoff, and too often remained to break up the meeting. At these meetings Horace had supported the speakers in a double sense—at the beginning by his sympathetic attention, and later on with physical assistance—and this was his only experience of the good-humoured violence known as ragging, for at his College it was not considered good form. But here anything was an excuse for a rag—and not merely such things as might have been expected, but the most innocent actions. Horace had to learn, for instance, that it was not the thing for a newly-joined cadet to spend too much of his time at Government House. When he had dined there a second time in ten days, he found himself arraigned before his fellows, who pointed out that this was “putting on side,” and deserved condign punishment. Mrs Tournour-Durell might, in mistaken kindness, ask him because she thought he wanted to be asked, but nothing short of bad news from home or incipient illness could be held to excuse such cadging for invitations. Therefore he was sentenced to run the gauntlet—which meant racing round the house at dead of night in scanty attire, avoiding or coming to grief over the obstacles artfully disposed in the verandah, and finding himself at each door and window the target of a hail of boots and hair-brushes, and similar missiles. It was not at all pleasant, but Horace had the sense to take it in good part, and to accept the hint conveyed.

The reason for the regulation was clear, indeed. It had always been the Berringer tradition for the ruler to be accessible to his subjects at any moment, and if at Government House the day had passed away of the old common meals, when any man who chose might drop in at the dinner-hour and claim a share in the good cheer prepared for the Datu and his guests, the custom still obtained in the case of officials who

were bachelors. It was considered an excellent way of promoting friendly intercourse between the rulers and the ruled, and Peter Tournour and the other old-timers would have been horrified at the idea of dropping it, but the budding rulers found it a sad bore when they wished to go out themselves. Therefore, since it was necessary that some one should always dine at Griffins' Den in order to act as host should any guests appear, it became naturally the duty of the junior cadet to refuse all invitations unless he knew that one of his seniors would be at home, and the convention was well established by the time of Horace's arrival. It was in fear and trembling that he faced his first native guests, supported though he was by the presence of his boy, who answered to the generic name of Appoo, as interpreter. Naturally enough, the senior members of the native community did not trouble themselves about such small fry as cadets, unless a new appointment to a district had been announced, when any elders who were visiting the capital would come to inspect their own particular Tuan, so that they might act as his sponsors later on. The younger Malays, when they accepted Horace's entertainment, were almost as ill at ease with him as he was with them. Their delicate beardless faces, their fine idle fingers, their gorgeous satins and brocades, and the reek of their unguents, all affected him with something very near disgust. All the efforts of Sir Gilbert Berringer had failed to inculcate in the aristocracy of his kingdom the qualities he longed to inspire, and the exhortations of the most convinced aesthete could have added nothing to their determination to exist beautifully and no more. Conversation was apt to languish during the evening, when—the meal over—Horace sat unhappily enthroned, with his guests arranged to right and left strictly in order of rank, and tiny cups of tea and enormous cheroots passed round the semicircle. The youths' one subject of interest in connection with England appeared to be the Westminster Aquarium—a popular resort of those days which would now be dubbed "hot stuff"—and when they found that one visit had not even made their host wish to go again they were obviously puzzled. Polite endeavours on his part to show an interest in the doings of their daily life failed because, where these could be called "doings" at all, they were hardly of

nature to be unfolded to a Tuan from whom sympathy could not be looked for, and somehow or other they knew that this Tuan would not sympathize. They can hardly have read in his eyes the wild yearning that seized him occasionally to drag them from their existence of drugs, cock-fighting, and similar delights, and set them to drill under a stern sergeant—precisely the desire which their fathers and grandfathers had stirred in his father forty years ago—but they were plainly uneasy in his presence. If Horace's stay in Bandeir hung upon his power of ingratiating himself with the Malays, he was not likely to remain long.

But with the tribesmen it was very different. They never showed themselves when the Malays were there, but on other evenings a timid figure would be seen prospecting from the shadow of the bushes, and presently a file of half-clad forms with wildly streaming hair would approach confidently, smell their host's hand with ecstatic sniffs of satisfaction, and await his invitation to be seated with the happy persuasion that their welcome was secure. To their intense delight and his own surprise, Horace found that the old phrases of greeting and dismissal had remained in his mind, though for any conversation he had still to depend upon the knowledge of Malay which was rapidly returning to him, and upon the assistance of Appoo. But the wild men did not care much for this roundabout way of talking. When the business of eating was over, they liked to sit and gaze adoringly at their host—as close as possible, that they might “drink his breath,” as they explained one night when he was almost overcome by the heat. Their devotion went even further, as he discovered once when they had departed after fervently rubbing his hand over each countenance in turn. Appoo did not come when he was called, and on being pursued to his own lair, was found presiding over a great filling of joints of bamboo—which served the tribes as buckets or bottles, according to size—with the water from his master's bath, and explained that the guests refused to go away without it. What they intended to do with it Horace could only surmise with dread, but he suspected, not unjustly, that Appoo was reaping a fairly constant revenue from the contributions of those who desired to convey the influence of “Tuan Balisi” to their homes, pending the visit which they

ardently desired and entreated. The other cadets were much amused by the tribesmen's fancy for their new colleague. They themselves, so far as social intercourse was concerned, generally got on better with the Malays, though most of them would have preferred the tribes, as more dependable at a pinch, for neighbours and subjects up the country. But the extraordinary attraction of Griffins' Den at present could only be explained by the happy thought that the wild men had at last found among their future rulers some one as weird as themselves—"weird" being the latest development in slang, and acclaimed by all as the exact epithet for Bliss.

Horace himself was touched as much as he was surprised by the devotion of his new friends. He would never be able to go among them with the confident tread of his father—that instinctive knowledge of the brown man's mind which had made Peter Tourneur say he had never known Sir Gilbert wrong where a native was concerned; his attitude was rather that of his mother, who had been equally astonished and delighted when after patient and laborious effort some little sign showed her that the people recognised her as sympathetic. To his shy diffidence, as to hers, it was curiously moving to know that a word, a glance, could give actual pleasure, and like her, he responded with genuine gratitude. There was something new and heart-warming in finding himself a dispenser of favours, his presence an object of eager desire, and naturally enough the idea of dwelling alone among these simple people began to lose its terrors. If the thought of the jungle still had something appalling in it, it had also something of pleasurable anticipation. The life at Griffins' Den, though he endured it as familiarising him with a side of existence he had unwisely avoided hitherto, could not but be uncongenial, and he hailed the prospect of escaping from it with an enthusiasm that surprised himself. His motives were mixed, of course—more mixed than he realised. Somehow, without reasoning the matter out, he had come to feel that in responding to his aunt's trumpet-call he had burnt his boats. Bandair claimed him from henceforth. But from one thing in the old life he could not, would not, set himself free—his worship for Erna Falck. She was always beside him in the visions he

now began to see of himself seated in his father's place, treading—however inadequately—in his father's footsteps. To her he must be able to look, as Sir Gilbert had looked to Lettice his wife, for inspiration to high endeavour, counsel in difficulty, consolation in failure. But when he pictured himself as depending upon Erna for these things, his diffidence came into play again. She would have to draw upon all her resources to make up for his deficiencies—what had he to offer her in return for all that he demanded? That romantic quality—he regarded it, naturally, with far other eyes than Melifred—which enabled her to view people and things in a light that never was on sea or land, would it succeed in rendering even endurable a shy, slow, plodding husband, who had needed one woman's help to make him see his duty, and must have another's to enable him to do it? He did not confess to himself—he did not even perceive; no young man in love would perceive—that the girl he adored was an arrant little hedonist, for whom all other considerations were of small avail beside a comfortable nest, a certain amount of pleasing excitement, and ample opportunities of personal display; but he had the feeling—at the back of his mind, as it were—that she was more likely to approve him as ruler of Bandeir than as its most junior cadet. If her romantic imagination could glorify the eminently prosaic position of Datu Mem into something like that of a barbaric queen, there might be some chance for him, he felt humbly. And Mr Faick, of course, would be much more likely to welcome the ruler of Bandeir as a son-in-law than the idler whom he had, half kindly, half contemptuously, offered to relieve of the responsibilities he failed to exercise. Which only shows that Horace was no more clear-sighted as to the motives of his prospective father-in-law than young men in love generally are.

The nett result of his musings and good resolutions was a request preferred to Mrs Tournour-Durell when he was able to have speech with her without offending the prejudices of his taskmasters at Griffins' Den. Would she ask her husband to have him appointed to a district, and let him go up-country as soon as possible? The request, coming from him, was astounding, and his aunt hardly knew what to make of it.

"Isn't it rather a pity to throw things up so soon?" she asked, trying to gain enlightenment tactfully.

"Is it soon?" he enquired, with a whimsical lift of the eyebrows which suggested that it did not seem soon to him.

"Ah, I was afraid the other cadets were giving you a bad time," she said anxiously. "But, my dear Horace, you insisted——"

"Oh, it will do me no harm to have gone through the mill a bit. It's not that."

"But I hoped you would get an insight into the minds of the Europeans here. The problem only grew up round your father gradually, and he was rather inclined to disregard their interests in comparison with the natives', but there are many more of them now, and it is really important."

"The Europeans here haven't got *very* much to say to a junior cadet with no parlour tricks, have they?" he suggested, smiling. The humorous tone took his aunt's fancy. Horace was finding himself. This was a bigger man than the one who had come out with her four months ago.

"What about your cousins at Mission Hill? I'm sure that sort of thing makes no difference to them."

"They're so—episcopal," he pleaded. This was ungrateful, for Charley and Albinia had been intentionally and resolutely kind to him, but Mrs Tourneur-Durell recognised its truth.

"I know they are, my dear boy. But think how many Bishops would be thankful to have such a good useful son and daughter! Well, then there are the Malays, you know——"

"I shall never get on with the Malays," shortly.

"Nor could your father—except with a very few. You said that exactly like him. But you must learn to speak the language really well, mustn't you? and it is a help——"

"It is all coming back to me. I am surprised myself to find how well I can follow an ordinary conversation. So is the old *guru*." He spoke feelingly, having spent the preceding night under his bed instead of upon it, owing to the righteous indignation of his fellows over the marks he had gained in the Malay teacher's quarterly examination. "It is the tribesmen I like,

and they like me—for some unimaginable reason. So I want to cultivate them a bit.”

“I suppose—you would not think of revealing yourself and taking your proper place now? It would be such a delight to us all, and put an end at once to this tiresome unrest.”

She spoke with bated breath, but urgently. Like Horace's, her motives were mixed. A recent letter from Melifred had alarmed her, though it merely said vaguely that the writer was afraid the stay at Bedinghurst might be a short one, since Mr Falck seemed to have an idea of taking Erna out to the East, though he had always refused to think of it before. Of course he meant to use her as a bait to draw Horace from his duty, thought Mrs Tourneur-Durell, and longed to confront father and daughter with a Horace firmly established in his rightful place. But he shook his head.

“The test is not complete yet,” he said. “You forget—the jungle.”

“But that's just it. When you get accustomed to the idea, the jungle will seem no more appalling than the river or the hills. When you go into it as one of a party, you will simply not think of it.”

“And I should have slipped away from the test. Don't try to dissuade me, please, for it means a lot to me. It's quite true that the other horror—the—the ship's deck—doesn't trouble me any more, but that's simply because the rats and cockroaches and things the first night on board have blotted it out. I don't want to shirk the other in the same way. I must conquer the jungle by myself, or know for ever that I am no good for Bandeir. Once I have satisfied myself, I promise I will try and satisfy you—though I wouldn't condemn a dog to lead the life poor Uncle Peter does! So you will ask him?”

“Very well; but I think you are making a mistake.”

“The man who never makes mistakes never makes anything,” quoted Horace sententiously.

CHAPTER VI.

HEADS.

"WANTS to go up-country, does he? Well, it's for him to command and me to obey," said Peter Tourneur grimly, when his wife broached Horace's request. "He can go and join Tarker, if he likes, and much good may it do him! I wonder if it has struck him what the other cadets will think of his getting an appointment before them?"

"He must know what they are like by this time. But, Peter, I am surprised—I never thought you would be willing to appoint him out of his turn."

"I would do anything to get him away from here just now. What's come to the people I can't imagine. I believe they are all bewitched."

"This unrest, you mean—the uneasiness—I don't know what to call it?"

"Call it panic, and you won't be far wrong. D'ye mean to say you haven't noticed the emptiness of the streets at night?"

"Now that you mention it, I have—or rather, what has struck me has been the way in which all the people we met were going about in crowds. But not cheerful crowds, as though they were on their way to a wedding or anything of that kind."

"That's it, precisely. They go about in crowds because they are afraid of something if they go about alone. But what that something is, and why they should take it into their silly heads to be afraid of it, they may know, but I swear I don't!"

"Then you think some magician is disturbing them?" Trouble had been caused several times in Bandeir by persons who claimed

to possess power over the spirits in whose influence all devoutly believed, and felt obliged to do something to justify the claim.

"That was the first thing I thought of, and I set the police to work at once, but they can't find out anything. No, the curious thing is that it doesn't seem to be the spirits they are afraid of this time. You could almost imagine—I declare it makes one laugh to think of it—that they are afraid of us—us, Europeans."

"But that is absolutely absurd!"

"So any one would say, wouldn't they? But I'll tell you what happened to me last night——"

"Peter, you don't mean to say there was anything wrong when you were so late getting in? I thought you said that Charley Donnellan brought you across in the Mission boat, but I was so sleepy——"

"Don't excite yourself; nothing happened, I assure you. I did come across with Charley, but not in the Mission boat. The Bishop had to go down the river, and it came out afterwards that when they found he would not be back till late at night, all the boatmen who are not Christians got out of going on some excuse or other, though it was not noticed at the time, as there are more than enough Christians to make up a crew. So he was all right, and when I got to the Mission about ten o'clock—I had to go a long way round because the swamps were so wet there was no getting across them—and Agnes told me Charley had to spend the night at a patient's in the Kling Bazar, and was just starting, I thought I was all right too, and hurried down the hill after him. I was prepared to find him just pushing off, but he was standing by the river calling for the boatmen. I never saw a man so flabbergasted, and it certainly did seem queer—not a soul to be seen. If they had only left the boats, my men could have paddled us across, but they were all drawn up under the houses. We saw that when we went prospecting about a bit, and Charley wanted to take one and be done with it, but I wouldn't have that. Now they had led us such a dance, I was going to know the reason why. We could see through the floor that the houses were still lighted, but the people were not on the verandahs as usual, though we could hear whispers overhead. So up the climbing-pole Charley and I went, and I made a fearful row at the first door, we came to, demanding why the boatmen

weren't out doing their duty. There was an awful shrieking and squealing, and then that old villain the chief boatman answered in a very shaky voice which he tried to make very big, that they were not going to open the door for anybody. Of course I kicked it open, and I tell you I never saw such a sight. Evidently the whole lot had crowded into old Sliman's house, and you could see nothing but ghastly faces and staring eyes. And the yells! as though they were all going to be murdered there and then. Well, when I had stood in the doorway a moment to show them that we were not spirits, naturally I thought it would be all right, but when they saw who we were they went on worse than ever. I was getting pretty sick by that time, so I picked out four men by name, and told them to come out at once and put us across. If you'll believe me, they flatly refused—said I might kill them if I wanted to, but they were not going to stir a step outside! Of course I was not going to stand that, so I swore I would clear them all out this morning, and send them down the river, where there would be no ferrying to do, and they would have to earn an honest living by fishing, if they didn't do what they were put there to do. The women wailed, and the children howled, and Charley tried to put in his oar, and I told him to hold his tongue, and there we were. At last they saw I meant what I said, and put forward old Sliman to speak for them. They would take us across if they might have out *two* boats, and put Charley in one and me in t'other, and divide the servants between them! Otherwise, I might do what I liked to them, but they wouldn't budge. Well, I wanted to get back, and I didn't particularly want to clear them all out, so I gave in—and, my word! we had something like a voyage! Bumping into one another all the way, paddling as if the devil was after them one minute, and stopping dead the next to look over their shoulders and see what was behind them—you never saw such a set; and they would barely give us time to land before they were off again, paddling for their lives and shouting continually from one boat to the other—to make'sure they were not dead, I suppose. I told Charley to say nothing about it when he came to breakfast, because I wanted to think it over, but I'm hanged if I can make anything out of it. What's your idea?"

"It certainly looks as if they were afraid of the dark—or of

Europeans in the dark," she said slowly. "But why now—after all these years?"

"Ask me another. Gilbert might have guessed what ailed 'em; I know nobody else who's likely to."

"Peter! what about Gilbert's son? Speak to him plainly; tell him it is his duty to make himself known and help you to solve this mystery before things get worse—or let me. I should not be surprised if his mere appearance here in his proper person put things right. The people will be so glad, so much interested, that they will forget whatever has been troubling them, and talk about nothing but Datu Brinja the younger."

"A fine Datu Brinja!" said Peter scornfully. "That poor nerveless chap? No, let him go up-country and keep out of the way until we have got things cleared up a bit. Then he can make himself known, with my blessing."

"But, Peter, you are doing him an injustice, I do believe. He is much more of a man than we thought him."

"My dear Rosamond, your geese always were swans. It's an amiable weakness, and I know I have reason to be grateful for it, but we can't afford to have it poking its nose into public affairs. What I know is that anything in the nature of trouble—such as this business is pretty sure to end in—is safe to disgust my young gentleman and send him scuttling home again. It's a most happy thing that he should have taken this notion into his head just now. Tarker will keep him amused and out of mischief, and when he is sufficiently bored he'll come down here again and make himself known."

"But if you are really expecting trouble, Peter—something like the Chinese rising, do you mean?—surely it might spread up-country, and what if anything happened to Horace?"

"Nonsense, nonsense! Really, Rosamond, you almost make me lose my patience sometimes. Anything happen to Horace, indeed! Ain't I sending him away that nothing *may* happen to him? And the Chinese rising! D'ye think these fellows have the spirit of the Chinks? I forbid you—forbid you, d'ye hear?—to say a word to Horace about all this. As though I wanted his help before I could put down a scare—as though I hadn't put down fifty without his valuable assistance! Once we get the clue, everything will be all right, and that clue

I'm going to get, and I'm going to get it without asking help from Horatio Berringer, Esq.!"

Rosamond knew her Peter. There were times when he might be led, but when he was obstinate—which was when he thought any one was trying to lead him—he could be very obstinate indeed. Now, when he ceased his perturbed tramping about the room, and stood squarely in front of her, his grey whiskers bristling and his lips drawn tight, she recognised—being a wise woman—that this was a moment for keeping her persistent conviction that she was right locked within her own bosom. The old smile was in her eyes as she rose.

"Dear Peter, don't glare at me! You are quite right; it's the clue we want, and I have an idea how we may find it. I will go and see Tungku Rokia, for I owe her a visit. She can never forget that I am not Lettice, but perhaps her unfriendliness may make her let out something that she would keep back if she wanted to be very sweet."

"Yes, good idea!" said Peter heartily, quite disarmed by his wife's instant deference to his superior judgment. "The old woman must know what the root of this trouble is, if anybody does, and the sooner we can find it out the better. I'll send round to say you are coming, and good luck to you!"

But in spite of this encouragement, it was with no very agreeable feelings that Rosamond prepared for her visit to the old Jhalabor Princess, the greatest lady in Bandeir. Nearly five-and-twenty years ago, Tungku Rokia had welcomed Lettice Berringer on her marriage, and taken her jealously under her wing, and some curious twist of mind made her regard Mem Pitah—which was Mrs Tournour-Durell's native name—as her dear Datu Mem's supplanter. She had never approved of her from the first, and it really seemed as if she could not forgive her for being alive now that Lettice was dead. Yet their relations were officially friendly, and the old lady never failed to exercise the friend's privilege of speaking her mind as to Mem Pitah's doings.

"What a welcome I should have if I could only take Horace with me in his proper person!" thought Rosamond as she looked out one or two things to take with her that might interest her hostess. "Tungku, behold! the Tungku Muda!" the poor old

thing would go mad with joy. She would probably adopt him as her grandson on the spot, so that he might not have to stay outside with the men."

But lacking the talisman of Horace's company, she found her welcome decidedly chilly. True, Tungku Rokia's son, Pangeran Nasir-ud-Din, was in waiting at the door to receive her and conduct her to the women's apartments, where his mother reigned supreme, but it struck her that he was by no means at his ease—and a Malay's uneasiness must be great indeed if he cannot dissemble it in the presence of a guest.

"My mother has not been quite herself lately, Mem," he said apologetically. "She has received few visitors."

"Have I come at an unsuitable time?" asked Rosamond, stopping on the threshold. "If so, I will wait for a day or two. Are not the Tungku Chi and I friends? Pray don't be afraid to tell me."

"Not so, Mem. No time could be unsuitable for a visit from your honour." But there was just the hint of a pause before Nasir-ud-Din spoke, as though he was not really anxious for her to come in, but feared she might suspect something if she did not.

Tungku Rokia herself, sitting like a little withered image on her cushions, the gorgeous green satin, stiff with gold embroidery, of her draperies emphasizing the dull brown of her faded complexion, was no more enthusiastic. Her keen eyes—by far the most active part of her—had something of hostility in them as they ran over the points of her visitor's dress and figure, but there was nothing new in this, for from the beginning she had held it unpardonable that Lady Berringer's sister-in-law should be young and beautiful and better dressed than herself. What struck Rosamond as ominous was a certain hint of triumph or gratification that seemed to be lurking in the background as the old lady uttered the prescribed compliments. Still, it seemed to suggest that whatever might be wrong in the state, Tungku Rokia was acquainted with it, and might possibly be induced to divulge it, though apparently this was by no means her intention. With all the sympathetic interest she could command, Rosamond enquired after the welfare of her hostess's descendants to the remotest generation, and when their respective vicissitudes

since her last call had been recounted, brought out a new photograph of her own sons to exhibit. For them Tungku Rokia had always had a soft place in her heart—as children they might have lived entirely on sweetmeats of her providing had their mother allowed it—and she seized the portrait with genuine eagerness, adjusted her sight to it with the difficulty natural to one who has rarely seen a picture in her life, and as she picked out one familiar feature after another, made the proper depreciatory remarks to avert the evil eye. But when she had fully expressed her distaste for Gilbert's commanding height and Tom's breadth of shoulder, something seemed to strike her. Laying the photograph down, she leaned forward, and fixing her eyes on Rosamond as though to compel an answer, shot out a question with intense malignity.

"These are your sons, Mem; but where is the son of Datu Brinja and my Datu Mem?"

In view of the circumstances, the demand was distinctly awkward, but Rosamond answered with the evasion which constant enquiries since her return brought naturally to her lips. "I thought I had told you, Tungku, that I saw the Tungku Muda just before I left England, and talked with him of his return hither, entreating him to come back and relieve his uncle of the duties laid upon him."

Tungku Rokia laughed with horrible suggestiveness. "As the tiger entreats the deer to shed the light of its countenance upon his lair?" she enquired.

Rosamond drew herself up. "What is this, Tungku? Do you accuse me of intending evil to the son of my dearest friend and sister?"

"Evil is no evil to the woman who desires to clear her own son's path to the throne," said Tungku Rokia.

Rosamond repressed her rising indignation with an iron hand. "Now you are speaking of what you don't understand, Tungku. Were any ill to befall our Tungku Muda—which may God forbid!—his heirs would not be my sons, but the sons of his father's elder brother in England." The grey eyes, stormy now, held the suspicious black eyes with such force that the old lady was cowed.

"Tuan!" she said plaintively; then added, "Is it indeed so?"

"Absolutely—by the will of Datu Berringer, which neither Tuan Peter, nor I, nor our sons, have ever dreamt for one moment of disputing. Why should we? It is in accordance with right."

Tungku Rokia bowed her head, yet not before Rosamond had caught the cunning gleam once more. "It is well," she said. "I am a poor foolish old woman, and the thoughts that come into my mind are without sense. My age is great; Mem Pitah will forgive."

"Not unless you tell me exactly why such thoughts should come into your mind," said Rosamond quickly. "Did any one suggest this monstrous thing, or did you dream it?"

"Doubtless it was an evil dream. So old am I that the thoughts of day and night are alike to me." The tone was smug.

"Yet you have spoken of it to others—to your son," as the thought of Nasir-ud-Din's uneasiness recurred.

"Not more than he to me. Is Tuan Pitah minded to exercise such a tyranny that the private converse of a son with his mother in the inmost apartments of the house is to be framed to please him?"

"You know very well that Tuan Peter exercises no tyranny at all, Tungku. He carries on the government for his sister's son by virtue of the powers entrusted to him by Datu Berringer on his deathbed, and with the aid of the Council of Chiefs, as did Datu Berringer himself. What is this talk of tyranny?"

"I did not say he ruled as a tyrant at present," persisted the old woman obstinately. "I asked Mem Pitah what her lord intended in the future."

"Why, what should he intend—save to hand over the government to the Tungku Muda at the earliest possible opportunity?" demanded Rosamond in astonishment.

Tungku Rokia laughed—a smothered, crackling laugh. "What, indeed?" she enquired significantly.

"I have listened to you long enough," said Rosamond, rising resolutely. "Bid me *jalan*, Tungku, and let me go. Alas that I must warn your son to look to his mother, lest it become known to the Council that she is spreading treasonable reports out of pure wantonness!"

The old lady's eyes gleamed evilly. "Be seated again, Mem, and learn that I do not speak without knowledge. You seek to

delude me with tales of having seen the Tungku Muda in England and spoken with him. So be it; that was more than half a year ago. But it has come to my ears that since that time our Tungku Muda has been lost, and no man can say where he is."

"Lost? What is this?" Rosamond echoed the word while she tried to collect her thoughts, and Tungku Rokia enjoyed her stupefaction.

"So it is declared. The youth has vanished from where he dwelt, leaving no word with his friends. Where is he? He is not in Bander; he is not on the way hither, for those who have enquired concerning him at Singapore can learn nothing. Is the way to the throne clear, Mem?"

"Who told you this, Tungku? News is not wont to pass so readily between England and Bander."

"True, Mem; yet we who love our young lord have eager ears for news of him, and to such ears tidings come in ways of which Tuan Pitah might not think."

"Will you tell me why you have conceived these horrible suspicions of Tuan Peter, who has done nothing to merit them?" cried Rosamond, exasperated.

"Softly, Mem!" Tungku Rokia indicated the motionless attendants at the other end of the long room, looking like so many heaps of gorgeous drapery, but all with greedy eyes and ears for their mistress and her visitor. "It is not well that the jackals should hear tiger quarrel with tiger."

At any other moment Rosamond would have laughed involuntarily at the unflattering simile, but now she was too anxious. "This is doubtless a plot," she said, with all the certainty she could put into her voice, in the hope of luring the old lady into some indiscretion that might illuminate the darkness a little. "The widow of Pangeran Sadr-ud-Din and her son are conspiring against the authority of the Wazir and the Council, and have invented and spread these slanders to further their aims." The thought crossed her mind that if there was such a plot, she stood very little chance of leaving the house alive, but Tungku Rokia rose to the bait. Shaking with anger, she stretched out a skinny hand and laid it on Rosamond's arm.

"What is this foolish talk?" she hissed. "Does Mem Pitah

think I do not know how her lord is propitiating the spirits, and why?"

This astonishing turn to the conversation left Rosamond speechless. She sat staring at the bony forefinger which Tungku Rokia was now pointing in her face.

"It is well done, indeed"—the old lady was almost unintelligible in her wrath—to seek to bring false charges against the house of Sadr-ud-Din. *They* have never been aught but faithful to the rule of Datu Brinja and his son. But ask Tuan Pitah about the headless corpses found in the river, and see what he says."

"But no headless corpses have been found in the river—no corpses at all."

"So Mem Pitah says. But let her ask the fishermen and those who dwell by the waterside."

Was this a ray of light on the problem that was vexing Peter? In spite of her breathless anxiety, Rosamond forced herself to choose her words carefully. "It is true that the fishermen have behaved strangely of late—like children frightened by tales of ghouls and *afrit*—and we have been much perplexed. But what is this about headless corpses, and what has it to do with Tuan Peter?"

"Say rather, what has it to do with the wall Tuan Pitah desires to build to confine the river, that he may make a royal pathway to walk on?"

"But I don't know—— I can't imagine——" persisted Rosamond.

"Are Mem Pitah's eyes really shut?" Evidently Tungku Rokia was irritated by her guest's denseness. "Why should her lord build a royal pathway but that he himself may walk upon it as prince?"

"That the Tungku Muda may be welcomed there when he comes to reign in Bandeir," said Rosamond promptly. The old lady was a little staggered, but made a creditable recovery.

"Not so, Mem, for then there would be no need to propitiate the spirits, whom our lord Datu Brinja—on whom be peace!—subdued once for all and bound to his service, as did Solomon the son of David. So great was the magic of our Datu that the spirits were forced to serve him and his son after him, though

deprived of that wherein they take most delight. It is to detach them from that service that Tuan Pitah tempts them with what he knows they cannot resist."

"And what is that?" in deep anxiety.

"Heads," replied Tungku Rokia, in a hollow whisper.

"Heads? what heads? Oh, the heads of fowls, you mean," with revived hope as the thought of the poultry sacrificed at the raising of each corner-post of a new house of any importance returned.

"Nay, Mem"—with distinct irritation—"the heads of men. Whose heads I know not, save that they must not be those of Europeans. No man may offer the heads of his own race. But why does not Mem Pitah ask her lord?"

"But what is Tuan Peter supposed to do with these heads?" Rosamond was determined to get to the bottom of the accusation. Moral indignation might come later.

"Bury them in the foundations, Mem, of course. What else should he do? Has not his royal pathway been destroyed again and again by the spirits, because it was directed against the house of Datu Brinja? But now that he has bought them over with the sacrifices for which they were hungering after being deprived of them for so many years, they have betrayed their former master, and will allow the river-wall to remain."

Alas for poor Peter, with his cunning scheme of arches to strengthen the wall at points of special pressure!

"But you know this is pure invention," urged Rosamond, knowing her audience too well to try and clear the ground by denying the existence of the spirits altogether. "You have no evidence whatever."

"What of the river-wall which still stands?" demanded Tungku Rokia triumphantly, and Rosamond, in despair, tried another method of attack.

"And can you believe, Tungku, you who have known Tuan Peter for so many years, and have seen him working at first under Datu Berringer, and since then keeping the promise he made him on his deathbed to watch over Bandeir for his son—can you believe that he would steal out in the night to slay innocent people, and take their heads to build into his foundations?"

"I would not have believed it——" began Tungku Rokia, but evidently sentiment was not to sway her. "But this is foolishness, Mem. How can I but believe those who have seen the dead bodies with their heads cut off? Where are those heads?"

"Who has seen these bodies?" asked Rosamond quickly. "Tell me the name of any one who has."

"How can I say, Mem? There are so many. Whenever any one comes into the house, the whisper begins, 'Have you heard of the corpses without heads in the river? Again I have met one whose brother had seen three at least.' And," as Rosamond moved impatiently, "my son, Nasir-ud-Din himself, heard Tuan Pitah say, smiting one hand upon the other as men do who take an oath, that he knew how to overcome the spirits opposing him, and that this time the wall would stand. What more can you ask?"

"Not much," said Rosamond, with a strained smile. "A little confidence, a little gratitude, for the man who has worked so long for you, a little understanding of the way we look at things. But I suppose it's hopeless. Is it permitted to depart?"

"*Jalan, jalan*,* Mem!" was the response.

* Lit., "Go on walking."

CHAPTER VII.

"I GO TO PROVE MY SOUL."

"WELL, I'm blessed!" was what Peter said, when his wife returned and poured out her story. "They seem to have got it all precious complete. Who in the world can have thought of tacking on that young fool Horatio's disappearance to my building?"

"And who told them that Horace had disappeared?" supplemented Rosamond. "And do they know that he is here, or not? There must be some very astute person behind the plot, to be able to invent these tales of headless corpses, and make the people believe they have been actually seen—though never by the one who tells about them."

Peter looked at her queerly. "You think it's all invention?" he said.

"But it must be—mustn't it? No bodies have been found—we should have heard of it, surely? And no one has even disappeared—to provide a body," with a little forced laugh.

"Well, as a matter of fact, a man named Taip—a fisherman—has been missing for two or three days," said Peter reluctantly. "I thought the chiefs displayed a curious delicacy in talking about it—looking away as though they didn't want to make things awkward for me—and now this explains it all. Naturally I said an alligator must have got him, and it seemed so obvious that it never struck me at the time there was anything suspicious in their agreeing with me so unanimously. But I did think this morning there was something a bit queer in their anxiety to assure me that it was quite unnecessary for me to trouble myself to go and see him. Old polite system of ignoring the peccadilloes of those in power, you know."

"Peter, do you mean they have found him?"

"Precisely. At least, they swore it was Taip, though I don't know how they could be sure. Because—I suppose you are bound to hear it some time—his head had been cut off, you see."

Rosamond's face was white. "Then you do think there is really something in it?"

"In what? Not in my going out with a *kris* and hacking off the heads of innocent passers-by in the dark, I assure you."

"No, of course, but—some one must be doing it."

"Not necessarily. What's to prevent anybody whose interest it is to spread this tale from pulling a drowned body out of the river, chopping off its head, and throwing it in again?"

"I see. That would not be quite so bad. But whose interest is it to spread the tale?"

"Why, nobody's, perhaps. By Jove, I hadn't thought of that! It may be only the people's natural appetite for horrors that has got up the scare at all. Tell you what, I believe there must be a stray Mahkyoon among the tribesmen down here just now. You know what the Mahkyoons are for heads. If anything happens to the village collection, they'll do anything to get fresh ones—raid another village, rob graves, anything. I ought to know, for I had trouble enough with 'em when I was up there. Why, I've known one or two men settle in another tribe and get married and live among 'em for years, and then one fine day cut off all the heads within reach—their own wives' and children's among them—and make off back to their own people. Now do you think, if one of those chaps is down here, and sees a nice unclaimed corpse lying convenient on the river-bank, that any considerations of propriety are going to stop him from helping himself if there's no one there to prevent him?"

"No—I see," said Rosamond doubtfully. Then her tone changed. "No, Peter, it does not explain everything. This poor man Taip's body has only just been found, as you say yourself, and he has only been missing for a few days. But the people were beginning to be afraid of us when I came back from home. Don't you remember—we noticed it as we came up the river? And they have been getting worse ever since."

"Well, the Mahkyoon may have been putting in a bit of his work as long ago as that. We can't tell."

"You would know. You must have heard if any one had disappeared—still more if a body had been found. No, what I think is that the rumours were started about that time, and have been growing ever since, encouraged—for some reason we can't guess—by the people who started them."

"And to make the thing seem incontrovertible, they get hold of Taip's body," added Peter. "Yes, that seems possible, at any rate, but who are the people who started the rumours, and why did they do it?"

"And what is the connection with Horace's disappearance, as Tungku Rokia called it?"

"Why, there's no connection—none whatever. But somebody has very cleverly suggested one, on purpose to discredit this government. It's a plot aimed at our rule here, evidently. Engineered from Jhalabor, I should say."

"Then do you see what to do?"

"Do? What should I do? Just sit tight, of course."

"And let all this go on?"

"Why, what d'ye expect me to do? Knock my wall to pieces, that the people may satisfy themselves there are no heads mixed up with the concrete? You seem to forget that any one capable of spreading the story and supporting it by robbing poor Taip of his head is capable of putting that or somebody else's where it would best serve his purpose. Besides, d'ye think anything would convince these fellows—if every scrap of building material lay before 'em pounded flat—that I hadn't somehow managed to abstract the proofs of guilt and make away with 'em? No, in a country that was swarming with head-hunters thirty years ago, the natural person to accuse now is the man who's spent all that time putting down head-hunting, and they won't change their minds."

"I quite see that you can't pull down the wall," said Rosamond hesitatingly; "but I thought, perhaps, if you left off building for a while——?"

"And left the people to say I was frightened because my nefarious schemes were discovered?"

"No, left the work for Horace to finish."

"And let it be understood that the spirits had failed me after all my efforts, and only the Berringer magic could conquer them? No, the only thing that will put an end to the rumour is for me to finish the wall as nearly as possible at the same time that the youth takes up his abode here. Then they will begin to say that the Berringer-owned spirits must have been helping all along, and the story of the heads was simply scandal."

"Then you won't ask him to make himself known now?"

"No, I won't!" violently. "For pity's sake, don't let us have all that over again! What is more likely to put him off, and frighten him home, than such a proof of these chaps' folly and unreasonableness and ingratitude and all the rest of it? He's got to see 'em in the best light, not in the worst."

"But, Peter, if all this goes on—if the next thing is actual murder? You see, they pretend you have set the example."

"Why, you don't think we're going to sit idle, do you? Now I know what we have to face, I'll put the police on the track, and anybody who tries any hanky-panky about heads will very soon find himself in the wrong box. Just let me get Mr Berringer safely out of the way, and we'll soon find out what's been going on."

Quite unconscious of the reinforcement to his wishes provided by current events, Horace found himself gazetted as assistant to the district officer in charge of Thakip—an idyllic locality where the climate was delightful, the scenery pleasantly diversified, and the tribesmen emphatically "tame." This conveys no reflection on their personal courage, but means merely that they had been under Berringer influence for many years, and responded to it gratefully—so that they were very different from their alarming cousins the Mahkyoons, whose country had been the last addition to Bandeir territory, and who were still liable to outbreaks of the savagery for which they had always been notorious. In his pleasure in the prospect before him, Horace failed, perhaps, to consider sufficiently the feelings of others. At any rate, he was altogether taken aback by the outburst of indignation with which his appointment was greeted by his fellows, headed by Brand, the senior cadet, an unfortunate who appeared to labour under a congenital inability to acquire the Malay tongue. As Mr Brand explained, with a fine altruism, he

was not speaking for himself—an unlucky beggar who could not manage to scrape through his exams. could not expect consideration—but when it came to gazetting over the heads of every man at Griffins' Den a weird creature who had only been four months in Bandeir, and had absolutely nothing to recommend him but a beastly habit of making friends with the niggers, and an ignoble facility in picking up the lingo, something ought really to be done. A court-martial was infallibly indicated, and Horace was haled from his bed and formally arraigned before it. The charge, of course, was that by "sucking up" to Mrs Tourneur-Durell he had corruptly procured his desirable appointment, and unfortunately it was essentially true. Whether, had he been able truthfully to deny it, his word would have been accepted, may be doubted, but his refusal to say anything was acclaimed as a confession of guilt, and he was sentenced to have his kit destroyed. Everything that belonged to him was to be smashed, torn to bits, or burnt, as the case might be, so that when he sneaked off to take up the appointment, it would be in borrowed clothes.

The effect of the sentence was no less astounding to the prisoner than to the court. To his own intense amazement, when he considered the matter dispassionately afterwards, Horace went berserk. Brand, as president, was naturally the first recipient of his attentions, and so utterly unexpected was his onslaught that the judge and his chair went over backwards. With incredulous joy the rest of the cadets flung themselves into the fray, and the gorgeous scrimmage that ensued was like nothing so much as Horace's former efforts to keep order at his friends' meetings in East London. Of course numbers prevailed, the refractory prisoner was one against several; but though he had a black eye as well as many other less evident bruises when his indignant—but almost respectful—conquerors dragged him up panting in his torn pyjamas to receive such increase of his sentence as the court might direct, he had the satisfaction of realising that most of them bore his mark. It was a satisfaction; he was honestly, shamelessly glad of what he had done, and in his mind at the moment there was no room for fear. With awful solemnity the insulted majesty of the law vindicated itself. The destruction already decreed was duly to take place,

and it was to be carried out by the prisoner's own hand, under the supervision of the court, who would see that it was thorough.

"I won't!" Horace jerked out.

"You refuse?" The president condescended to parley.

"Absolutely!" The two pairs of eyes met as the prisoner glared defiance at his judge. Brand had very remarkable eyes—hard, light blue, curiously unchanging in expression; Horace had said to himself once or twice that they were an inquisitor's eyes, but that may have been because Brand usually took the lead in devising unpleasantness for him. Now it seemed to him that for one moment he saw a gleam of understanding, of recollection, in them. It was almost as if Brand knew his secret. The thought recalled to him the peril in which that secret stood, if his parents' photographs, the names written in his books, were exposed to his foes. It had not been that, he was sure of it, which had spurred him to his onslaught on them, but he realised it now. All this passed through his mind in the moment in which he glared at Brand and Brand at him, and that recollection—if recollection it was—flashed upon Brand's memory, and then the cadets received their second surprise that night. Brand jumped up.

"Then I'm hanged if you shall!" he cried. "Let him go, you chaps. He's a good plucked 'un, and deserves to leave the court without a stain on his character. Why in the world did you never put up a fight before, Bliss?"

Horace could not have told him. He asked himself the question when he had been chaired ceremoniously back to the bed from which he had been pulled, and unceremoniously tumbled into it, to become conscious of his aching limbs as the glow of battle died down. Had his sufferance of the treatment meted out to him by his fellows been part of a kind of penance, imposed on himself by himself, for the years in which he had neglected his duty? Or had he submitted simply because he was afraid to resist? Something of Lettice Berringer's power of self-analysis and self-torture had descended to her son, and he debated the matter with himself till one particular aspect of it came into prominence instead. This night's victory—was it a sign that he had conquered fear, that the spectres of the mind,

once faced, were dissolving into empty air, as his aunt had predicted? or had he been permitted an inglorious escape simply because Brand knew, or guessed, his identity, and considered it impolitic to make himself too disagreeable to his future chief? This problem was equally insoluble with the other, and was clearly doomed to remain so. It was impossible to solve it by asking Brand the question directly, for if he knew nothing before, he would know everything then. On the whole—though perhaps hope told a flattering tale—Horace felt able to assure himself that he must have been mistaken in his interpretation of that momentary look. It had signified compunction, genuine and generous recognition of valour in an unexpected quarter, and not any special knowledge.

Brand's behaviour during the few days before Horace's departure seemed to confirm this diagnosis, for he took him under his wing, and protected him against the other cadets in a way that caused some protest. It was all very well for a man who had had no chance of being appointed to Thakip to be so precious chummy all at once with the interloper, but those who had good right to the post could hardly be expected to take their supersession so calmly. Still, Brand's word had been law for so long that, reinforced by his heavy hand, it had the desired effect, and Horace's last fortnight at Griffins' Den was a halcyon period for all concerned. Not even the unrest in the country, which was perturbing so grievously the heads of the government, served to interrupt its harmony. The matter was discussed, of course, but the explanation that had suggested itself to Peter Tourneur seemed so natural and obvious in a country of head-hunters that no other was sought. In public, that is—for in private Brand surprised his new *protégé* by taking a gloomier view. It was one of the evenings when a number of young Malays—chiefs and connections of chiefs—had been enjoying the cadets' hospitality, and with native politeness had acquiesced gracefully in their hosts' boundless contempt for the foolishness and timidity of the common people in making such a fuss about what was, even at the worst, a solitary murder. It struck Horace that Brand's agreement with the general view was not quite whole-hearted, and on questioning him afterwards he

learned that Brand suspected the existence of widespread sedition among the natives, and thought it not unlikely that an attempt would be made by the enemies of Berringer rule to exploit Taip's death to its prejudice. Naturally enough, Bliss, as a newcomer, would think it absurd that the mere shadow of rumour could breed suspicion between Bandeir and the family from which it had received such extraordinary benefits, but he himself had been long enough in the country to know that the man who builds on the gratitude, the loyalty, or even the common-sense of an Oriental population, has chosen sand for his foundation. So dark a forecast was depressing for the moment, but Horace was able to shake off its effects. The fact that his uncle, through his aunt, made no attempt to persuade him that anything was wrong, his recent victory over himself and his tormentors, the bracing prospect of adventure he beheld opening before him—all combined to incline him to scout Brand's forebodings and go forward cheerfully. When he and Appoo embarked for their voyage up the river, with the undestroyed kit serving as a sort of monument of past prowess, he felt like another Columbus, little knowing what he was losing by his departure.

It was only a fortnight later that the people of Bandeir enjoyed a great excitement—a strange steamer came into the river. Peter, who retained all the seaman's interest in ships and their movements, hurried into Government House from the signal-station—whither information came direct from the coast—bubbling over with interest.

"Can't think who she can be," he said. "Horton says she looks like Beckford's old *Trengganu*, refitted and flying a new house-flag, which he doesn't recognise. Calls herself the *Herman and Dorothea*"—he was flicking over the pages of a shipping list—"but I don't find her here. Beckford was on his last legs, I know—must have sold the *Trengganu*—but who can have bought her and changed her name? She's known everywhere in these seas—seems silly, if you ask me." As no one had asked him, or offered any contradiction now, he went on muttering. "Wonder if it can be true about Palbat, after all? I told you there was a rumour that some Belgian Company had got

hold of a concession there, didn't I? but it seemed absurd, as there's no river that's any good. The Palbat River is nothing but rapids."

"No, I don't think you mentioned it," said Rosamond. "Belgian, did you say?" Horace's words, "The Company is to be registered in Brussels," recurred to her. "I wonder if it is really German—or at any rate, if Mr Falck has a hand in it." A connection with Germany would be the last thing of which a Belgian Company could be suspected nowadays, but thirty-five years ago, under that enterprising monarch the Financiers' King, things were different. As circumstances dictated, Belgium played the parts of a spoilt child to be indulged by Germany with titbits of other people's property, a catspaw to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for her, and the useful accomplice who distracts public attention while the pickpocket does his work. But the full extent of her usefulness to her bigger neighbour was naturally not then known to the world.

"Well, if Sansoms have gone and mixed themselves up in Palbat, they've burnt their fingers at last," said Peter comfortably. "I don't know how many concessions there have gone to smash, but it must be a dozen at least. Coming down the river, Rosamond? Horton says he could see ladies on board."

"But we don't know who they may be! Are you really going to meet this ship, Peter?"

"Well, not exactly to meet her, perhaps, but just toddle a bit in that direction and see what is to be seen—why not?"

"Oh, Peter—curiosity, curiosity!" laughed his wife. "Do you expect me to believe that once we had sighted her, you would be satisfied without going all over her—from stem to stern?"

"Well, and what's the harm? Will you come? Oh, here's another message"—he broke off as a servant entered with a chit, read it and looked up with a frown. "You're right, Rosamond. Horton signals that the vessel belongs to the Palbat Development Company, and has Mr Falck, the managing director, and his daughter aboard. Falck—eh? and the fascinating Miss Erna? How's that for barefaced hunting of Horace?"

"Well, at any rate they are a fortnight too late," said Rosamond, with a satisfaction she could not repress. "But I can't quite make it out, Peter. Horace seemed to think he would be breaking irretrievably with Mr Falck if he refused his offer, whatever it was, and came out here. I didn't think it was as serious as that, or Mr Falck would surely have thrown up Bedinghurst, as the lease had not been signed—and he asked me to call upon his daughter in London, too. But he did speak as if his feelings were very much hurt. I gathered that Horace would have to take all the steps himself if there was ever to be anything between the young people again. And now actually to come here, and bring the daughter! It really is like pursuing Horace, as you say."

"Oh, well, Horace is out of their reach, and anyhow, the old chap was awfully decent about Bedinghurst," said Peter eagerly. "So let's go down and meet 'em—eh?"

"If you like. But I do wish we knew——" Rosamond began.

"Well, you've got a spy in the hostile camp, haven't you? I suppose that girl with the preposterous name has come too?"

"I suppose so, or I should have heard. How you do hate poor Melifred, Peter!"

"I don't hate her—I've said so before—but she does blurt things out so. But that's all right for you just now. You've only got to pump her. Come along; the barge is waiting."

In amused resignation Rosamond complied. Peter would never be happy until he had examined every detail of the transformed *Trengganu*—if *Trengganu* she was—and she herself must confess to a lively curiosity as to the reasons for what appeared such a coming-on disposition on Mr Falck's part. As if that benevolent gentleman had read her mind, he laid bare his motive at the very outset of their interview. The group upon the deck of the *Hermann und Dorothea*—Mr Horton at the harbour-mouth could hardly be expected to note the German spelling—had insensibly separated a little. Her captain and Peter were exchanging marine technicalities, Erna looking on like an angel in a sun-helmet contemplating indifferently the trivial concerns of mortals. Melifred was holding fast to one of her godmother's hands, overwhelmed with joy at seeing her

again, but with a touch of something like shyness—or was it shamefacedness?—in her manner. Mr Falck spoke in his big melodious voice, and explained at once the cause of Melifred's uneasiness.

"I am come—we are all come—to ask a favour from the gracious Mrs Tourneur-Durell. Goot Meess Milly here thinks me too bold. Be it so. The gracious lady will pardon my boldness, and she will declare her pardon by granting my request. Will you, dear madam, permit me to leave in your care for a few weeks these two young girls, until I can provide a suitable dwelling for them in Palbat?"

Melifred was covered with confusion, and Rosamond smothered her own sense of the coolness of the demand to reassure her. To the hospitable island mind there was nothing out of the common in it, but the absence of notice looked like an attempt to compel consent, as did the public way in which Mr Falck had made his request. Mrs Tourneur-Durell paused—but very slightly—before replying.

"Indeed we shall be delighted to have Melifred and her friend with us. I only wish there was more in the way of gaiety that we could offer them at present. My nephew, whom you know, is up-country for some time."

If she expected to see Mr Falck's face fall at the information, she was disappointed. He bowed his head in the most matter-of-fact way. "In a new place one is always sorry to miss a friend. Yet I understand our goot Mr Berrincher is here at present under an assumed name—so? Then his absence relieves me from the fear that by some inadvertent word I might be so unfortunate as to betray his secret."

"Surely you are doing yourself an injustice, Mr Falck?" Mrs Tourneur-Durell lifted her eyebrows a very little.

"You shall chutch, dear madam. My confidence in myself is shattered, I admit it. Confiding in the assurance of the Netherlands authorities that I should find in Palbat a harbour, a house, all necessary conveniences, awaiting me, I bring my daughter and Meess Milly on the ship with me. I find not so much as a landing-stage, the house in ruins, the climate of the district malarious. A site in the hills must be chosen, a new house

built, a road to it cut, before I can risk the health of these tender yong creatures there."

"You mean you would have left them at Singapore if you had known what you would find?"

Mr Falck lifted his hands and let them fall again. "Gracious lady, I throw myself on your mercy. Ask Meess Milly why I could not leave her and my daughter at Singapore. She has my earnest request to tell you everything, and I know I am sure of your sympathy."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SENIOR CADET.

"AND now tell me all about it, Melifred." The moment had come at last. Erna, who had been absent-minded all the evening—and what in a less ornamental person would have been called cross—had gone to bed early, her father loudly and publicly explaining her *malaise* by describing the sufferings to which she had been a martyr on the voyage. He and Peter were now safely disposed of in the smoking-room, and Rosamond had Melifred to herself, and was able to give rein to her curiosity.

"Oh, Aunt Rosamond, I am so ashamed! What must you think of us? It took a load off my mind when you said Mr Berringer was away. If he had been here I think I should have died of shame for Erna, for what could he imagine but that she was running after him?"

"Don't be so tragic, dear. After all, I suppose poor Erna is only trying to repair her mistake, isn't she? She has found out she cares for him more than she thought, and feels she has the heiress's responsibility of making the first move to put things right."

"You always put things so kindly—but I suppose that's it."

"Well, my dear Melifred, what else can one do in this case? One is sorry for the poor girl, for after all, she must have suffered a great deal before she could urge her father to bring her here. I am only so glad to find how much she cares for Horace. When I saw her in London I should never have guessed it. It just shows what absence will do."

"Oh—er—yes, of course," agreed Melifred, with a notable

absence of enthusiasm. "And you think he cares for her just as much as ever?"

"Of course. Why not? I am really thankful he has gone up-country before she came, for otherwise I am afraid he would never have torn himself away from here, and it is far better that he should have a little experience of jungle life before taking up his duties and settling down."

"Then he is going to take his proper place as he ought?" Melifred was looking at her very straight.

"I most earnestly hope so, and I believe it, too. The old life has returned to him very wonderfully, and he seems to have something of his father's fascination for the tribesmen. When he has once overcome his diffidence, I am sure he will do well."

"I am so glad—so very glad." Yet Melifred's tone was not glad. Rosamond laid a hand playfully on hers.

"Come, Melifred, what is the matter? You were to tell me everything, you know. It was Mr Falck's particular wish."

"I only wish I could!" said Melifred despairingly. "But how can I when I don't know everything? There seem to be so few things I am really sure of."

"Well, tell me those few, at any rate. Why couldn't Mr Falck leave you at Singapore—if it wasn't because Erna was too anxious to see Horace at once?"

"No!" said Melifred, with portentous solemnity. "It was not that. It was because of Mr Sansom."

"Mr Sansom—Mr Falck's partner?"

"Yes—that horrid man. At least, Erna likes him. But I think I told you before that she finds all dark men interesting, and he is very dark. But he is not *pucca*, Aunt Rosamond—you know what I mean? I am sure Mr Falck doesn't like him personally, though they are the greatest friends in business. That's what makes it so awkward."

"But is he—does he admire Erna?"

"Naturally he admires her—every one does; but every one doesn't show it as he does. I think I told you when we said good-bye in London how he had tried to scrape acquaintance with her by calling at the hotel, and how excited she was after a glimpse she had of him. Well, after that, he called one day and

asked quite openly for me. He had a lovely box of chocolate in his hand, and said he had brought it for me, because all nice young ladies liked chocolates. He was holding the lid a little open, and I could see there was a gold bangle inside. So I just looked at him, and told him he had made a mistake. He said, 'Not at all,' and was going away, leaving the box, but I told him if he didn't take it I should have it sent after him. Then he came up to Erna and me a few days after, when we were walking in the square in front of the hotel, and spoke to Erna just as if he had been introduced to her. It really isn't altogether her fault, Aunt Rosamond; she simply can't help being pleased to see people, and being friendly and pleasant to everybody. She had been rather doleful and bored before—it was the day after you and Mr Berringer sailed—but you should have seen the difference! Of course it gave him a wrong impression, and she wouldn't take any notice of anything I said or did. So when we got in, and Mr Falck came back, I told him, and Erna said I was a cat, and wouldn't speak to me for a week—when she remembered—but we were not allowed to go out by ourselves after that. Then I suppose Mr Sansom went out again to Singapore, and we went down to Bedinghurst—but for such a short time! This is one of the parts I don't understand—whether Mr Sansom cabled to Mr Falck that he was wanted out here, or whether Mr Falck came out of his own accord, and why he brought us. Because, of course, when we got to Singapore, there was Mr Sansom to meet us, and though Mr Falck was really quite *stony* to him, it didn't seem to make any difference."

"But does Erna encourage this man?"

"In any one else you would call it encouragement, but not in her, because she does it to everybody. I believe she really does care for Mr Berringer, but she can't see why she shouldn't have as many men friends as she likes. And of course they like it, so she is quite happy. You can imagine what it was like in Singapore. I told Mr Falck I thought we had better board with a family while he was away—just that there might be a gentleman to keep Mr Sansom in check—for I didn't think it would be enough to have some elderly lady living with us at the hotel, which was what he thought of at first. But he said he could see that Mr Sansom was irrepressible, and he would take us with

him when he went to Palbat. Erna didn't like leaving Singapore at all, and she really is a bad sailor, so she has been feeling dreadfully injured."

"Ah, now I see why Mr Falck brought you here, and I don't wonder that he would be glad to get such a troublesome daughter off his hands. Compared with Mr Sansom, no doubt poor Horace seems an ideal son-in-law—but I don't know that the comparison is particularly flattering to him."

"No, and I always have the feeling that Mr Falck doesn't really want Erna to marry him—he is merely, as you say, an alternative. A German nobleman, now—oh, it has made my blood boil sometimes at Altenhausen to see Mr—I mean, to have to be meek and subservient to horrible old Gräfin who came to inspect Erna and see if she was good enough for their sons! Or a Dutch baron, even—there seem to be a good many about in this part of the world. Erna would like to be a baroness, but they all seem to have fair hair, unfortunately, and she can't make herself take an interest in them. That's what Mr Falck would really like, I believe, but if it can't be managed, then Mr Berringer will do."

"Mr Berringer ought to be much obliged," said his aunt grimly, then revolved the situation a little in her mind. "Then do I understand that you stay here until Horace comes back—however long that may be—and that he will find Erna awaiting him with her father's blessing?"

"I don't know!" Melifred's voice was despairing. "I don't see how Mr Falck could—it is making Erna so *cheap*—and she really is the apple of his eye. Sometimes—I don't know whether I ought to say it—I have the idea that he has something quite different in his mind, and is only using her as a sort of bait. But when I think it out, I can't find any reason why I should feel like that, except just that I know how frightfully clever he is whenever he has set his heart upon anything."

"Well, all this seems to make it more and more important that Horace and Erna should not meet until Horace has taken his proper place as Datu," said Rosamond thoughtfully. "Really, if we had arranged things, it could not have been better."

"No, and it is a very good thing that Erna should see how nice and comfortable everything is here," said Melifred. "She

hated Palbat—though we were only on shore there for a night—and it really was very rough, in a native house with no proper furniture. She cried all the next day because we were coming on here instead of going back to Singapore, and said it would kill her to go and live in the wilderness.”

“Well, we must try and show her that the ‘wilderness’ is not so very bad after all,” said Rosamond, looking round at the cool bare room, with its “mosquito-house” bearing eloquent testimony to the real danger menacing European life in Bandeir. “Because the one thing she must understand is that if she marries Horace she lives here.”

“Of course!” agreed Melifred heartily. “And this is quite the gay world after Palbat. Oh, I wonder—I do wonder—whether Mr Falck was really surprised at the state of things in Palbat, or knew it all along!”

No unprejudiced person, hearing Mr Falck as he discoursed to his host on the unpardonable deception of which he had been the victim, could have had a doubt on the subject. Even Peter, prepared to be sceptical, found an uneasy doubt insinuating itself into his mind, and urging that the big simple-minded man was really a child in these matters. But in the part of the good man struggling with adversity Mr Falck was unsurpassable. His one anxiety—for the safety of his daughter and Melifred—now at rest, he would return like a giant refreshed to wrestle with the task that should never have been imposed upon him. Nay, he would avenge himself upon his inhospitable concession by making the necessary work merely the first stage in a huge civilising programme. The rocks obstructing the channel of the river should be blown up, and a waterway secured from the hinterland to the harbour which would be formed by throwing out breakwaters to protect the inadequate haven at the river-mouth. In the hills should spring up a European settlement, whence the rulers and traders of the community would descend daily by rail to their places of business in the lowlands, returning at night to the salubrious heights where their wives and children would enjoy a perpetual combination of the scenery of the tropics with the climate of the temperate zone. Peter himself had too much of the empire-builder’s enthusiasm to criticise the visions coldly, though he showed signs of restiveness when his guest

"So. And with regard to the supply of boats?"

"There again it's not safe to rely upon government property—not enough of it. Tell you what, you had better go up to the boat-station—where the tides stop, and the river boats mostly lie—and see what you think. I'll find you somebody to go with you to-morrow morning, if you like. I have to be in court most of the day."

"Never can I fully express my sense of your goodness, my dear Mr Tournour-Durell!" said Mr Falck, with extreme fervour, to the great embarrassment of Peter, who had all the average Englishman's hatred of being thanked.

They left Government House together the next morning, and going along Victoria Road, Peter kept his eyes open for some one to whose care he might entrust his guest. Two or three of the cadets from Griffins' Den were sauntering up and down, getting a breath of outdoor air before their detested duty of following the cases in court, where they were supposed to improve their knowledge of human nature, the language and law, at the same time. Peter seized joyfully on Brand.

"Can't do *you* much harm to miss a morning in court!" he said. "You take Mr Falck up to the boat-station and wherever else he wants to go, and show him everything."

He went on to explain Mr Falck's wishes as Brand fell into step beside him, and before hurrying off to court, saw the two into their boat and gave the boatmen their orders. Peter was always in a hurry, for if he had not too many things to do, he made them.

The boatmen's task was easy enough this morning, for the tide was still running, and they were able to send the boat along with the slight effort which they loved, since it was purely mechanical, and they could set their minds free in dreamland or some other blissful region where work was not. Even the man at the steering-paddle appeared to do his part rather by instinct than by conscious volition, as though obstacles and cross-currents evoked naturally the movements necessary for avoiding them.

"These men speak no English." Mr Falck and his guide had exchanged a sentence or two as they watched the paddles moving in perfect time, or the dexterous manœuvres of the steersman. Now this remark fell casually from Brand, as he indicated

with his finger the view of Mission Hill from the point they had reached. Mr Falck turned half round to look at it.

"You are the yong man of whom my partner told me?" he said. "You haf been here—how long?"

"Nearly two years, sir, but I'm afraid they won't keep me much longer. You see—it's awfully unfortunate, but I *cannot* get through my Malay exam."

"Most unfortunate. Yet you speak seven dialects, I believe?" Mr Falck's tone was perfectly serious and sympathetic.

"Well enough to be understood, sir, but it's that abominable grammar, you know!" On the side away from the men, Brand's eyelid fluttered very slightly.

"So. And your Cherman birth has never been suspected?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. I am a British subject—born on board a British ship. Mr Sansom is the only person who knows that my father spelt his name Brandt, but in case it should come out at any time, I keep up my sleeve an imaginary Dutch ancestor who arrived with William of Orange."

"So—very goot. And during these two years——?"

"Mr Sansom gave me to understand, sir, that you took an interest in Bandeir, and would like to take a greater one. I was introduced quite naturally to Mr Tourneur by his old friend Captain Downman, whose second mate I had been for some time, and came here as cadet. I had to find out various things about the government and the state of feeling here, and I think I may say Mr Sansom is pleased with my reports."

"And not only Mr Sansom, but myself. And latterly you haf found yourself charched with the care of our yong friend Mr Horace Bliss?"

"Yes, sir, and I have been in rather a difficulty about him. I understood I was to do as much as I could, without attracting observation, to disgust him with the place—choke him off, in fact. Well, the other chaps and I gave him a fairly warm time, but he stuck it out much better than I expected, and actually asked for and got an up-country appointment. I had to act on my own judgment then—I have been allowed a pretty free hand—and though I could have worked it quite naturally that he got so knocked about—really disabled, you know—that he had to be sent home, it would have been practically certain to come

out who he really was, and I thought that would be contrary to your wishes. So I made out that I was disarmed by his pluck and all that sort of thing, and he loves me like a brother now. But I had to let him go to Thakip."

"Mr Brand," said Mr Falck cordially, "I honour you. You are an acent worth employing, for you are not afraid to use the discretion with which you are entrusted. The confidence you haf inspired in—Mr Bliss—may be a most valuable asset to us in the future. I rechoice to haf had this explanation with you, for I own I was much disappointed yesterday to find our yong friend gone."

"I informed Mr Sansom of his appointment at the earliest possible moment, sir."

Mr Falck paused. "Doubtless his letter has missed me as I moved from place to place," he said, with finality. "To return to Mr Bliss—did he gif you to understand that there existed tender feelings between himself and a member of my family?"

Decidedly Mr Falck understood the English less well than he spoke their language! But it was not Brand's business to point this out. "We guessed he was in love with somebody, sir, but he never mentioned her name."

"All the better, perhaps. Well, it is unfortunate, but this yong lady has conceived the most extreme distaste for Jhalabor and the life here. It is in my mind that the feeling will not be removed by a few weeks spent in Bandeir. If it should happen that she and Mr Bliss should meet, it is hardly likely that she would keep silence on the subchect."

"Most unlikely, sir. I'll see that they meet if I can manage it."

"I am far from suchesting that the yong lady has a right to impose any commands on him. But it is possible that her wishes might reinforce his own. What kind of place is this Thakip?"

"That's the worst of it, I'm sorry to say. It's our show district—softest job in the country."

"Then that must be altered. Either Thakip must chanche, or Mr Bliss must quit it. It is for you to arranche. I leave you full discretion. Let the yong man win his spurs." The benevolence of Mr Falck's smile and tone defies description.

"Are there any limits, sir? I mean, is he to be got out anyhow, or do you draw the line at—well, anything unpleasant?"

"My fervent desire is that he should execute a voluntary transfer of his rights, and leave the country of his own free will. But if that cannot be, other means must be used to—let us say, induce the transfer."

There are drawbacks in not taking an agent fully into your confidence. Brand felt it, as he pondered Mr Falck's carefully chosen words. On the one hand, they might mean that he was not to stop short of bringing about Horace's death, but on the other, they might be interpreted—especially if that death should occur—as having meant nothing more sinister than that Mr Falck would have allowed him to marry his daughter, if no lesser bribe proved effectual. But Brand knew better than to ask for more precise directions. The agent who must be told everything in so many words is not likely to rise high in his employer's favour.

"There's only one thing, sir," he ventured to point out. "I'm afraid they're really going to kick me out after failing this last time. They'll give me one of the schooners, I dare say, but it will mean that I shall be away a lot of the time. It struck me, from what Mr Tourneur said, that you would be wanting somebody here to look after your stores and things, and see that they were sent on promptly, and that if you asked him——"

"So. But will not your insuperable ignorance of Malay be a drawback?"

"Oh, I have picked up enough to abuse the boatmen! A good *comprador* could do all the office work—Mr Sansom is sure to have a Chinese clerk he could send. And if I went on living at Griffins' Den——"

"You shall. Mr Tourneur himself shall suggest it. There is a very fine art, Mr Brand, in allowing your adversary himself to force upon you the moves of which he would afterwards complain, were he in a position to do so. From that vantage-point, then, you will continue your manoeuvres to embarrass the government of Bandeir. You consider yourself successful so far?"

"I have all the ground prepared for a grand blow-up when it's thought necessary, sir. The discovery of a few more head-

less corpses will do it, for the people are in an awful state of panic already. It wouldn't take much now to set the whole country in a blaze."

"That we will avoid if possible," said Mr Falck thoughtfully. "Even if the British and Dutch Governments failed to intervene, it would be difficult to induce them to look kindly on measures of repression undertaken from Palbat. No, my goot Brandt, keep the country in as excited a state as you please—even at the expenditure of a corpse or two—but if an actual rising is necessary, let it be confined to the up-country districts, where I can step in to suppress it without taking all the world into my confidence. A strong hand for the natives, liberal terms for the Europeans—including Mr Bliss—and Berrincher rule gives place to Falck rule in Bandeir."

"I'm sorry about one thing, sir. Mr Sansom had done it before I could get at him. The way he got the rumours spread that there was something queer about the river-wall was splendid, and I had only to play up to him about the heads. But it was an awful mistake to bring the Berringers into it. Of course it must have been tempting to find all ready to his hand the chance of making out that young Berringer had disappeared, but it looks to me very much as though he may have to disappear really. You see, the people are as devoted to the name as ever, and if he turned up, they would think everything was all right."

"Now I wonder whether Sansom thought of that?" said Mr Falck meditatively.

"Oh, I don't expect so, sir; why should he? I know he doesn't like the Berringers, but that's rather different. But you see that it makes it awkward?"

"So. But you will be equal to the emergency, Mr Brand. There is always the possibility that the yong man will see his own advantage, and consent to leave the country without revealing himself. Or it might even be possible for him to maintain the appearance of independence while in reality ruling in complete dependence on Palbat. Naturally there is also the chance that he might unfortunately disappear, as you say. But that we need not discuss. I leave the matter in your hands. My confidence in you is supreme."

No, Brand was not to be able to say that he had been prompted to do—whatever might prove necessary to be done. The utmost he could deduce from what had been said to him was that Horace Berringer's death would not afflict Mr Falck with any overwhelming grief. Whether the opposite alternative—that Horace should marry Miss Falck and bring Bandeir into complete commercial union with Palbat—would cause that grief, he did not feel able to decide. On the whole, he thought Mr Falck's feelings would rather be those of the conscientious shopper haunted by the fear that she has paid more for one of her purchases than it is worth. The one thing certain was that whatever happened, the responsibility would not be Mr Falck's.

CHAPTER IX.

PARALLEL LINES.

Of the "very fine art" of which he had spoken to Brand, Mr Falck was presumably a skilled exponent. At any rate, the suggestion he wanted came from Peter as pat as if he had been prompted. It only needed Mr Falck to remark that now he had gone into the matter of transport and accommodation, and was negotiating for a suitable piece of land on which to erect his storehouses, he must look for a trustworthy European to represent him in Bandeir and watch over his interests—and the thing was done. Bandeir still preserved much of its old exclusiveness, and looked askance at what it called "promiscuous" Europeans who wished to come and settle, and might desire to exploit the natives, so that it was with real relief that Peter remembered the deserving Brand, so unfortunately handicapped in his chosen profession, but so admirably adapted, while serving the Palbat interest, to do it in the Bandeir spirit. He could hardly wait for his guest to finish his sentence.

"What about Brand—fellow who went up the river with you?" he demanded eagerly. "Splendid worker—only thing against him that he can't pass his exams. I hate the thought of getting rid of him, but the ships have all their full complement just now, and to let him hang on at Griffins' Den doing nothing would be unfair to him, as well as a bad example to the other cadets. What d'ye think of it?"

"I think I am most deeply indebted to you," said Mr Falck politely. "The young man appeared to me to be highly intelligent."

"Intelligent? I believe you!—except in the one thing. Well,

if you decide to take him, he's welcome to stay where he is—keeps such excellent discipline." It is to be feared that Peter was biassed by reports of the hard measure dealt out by Brand to his exasperating nephew.

"My goot sir, your kindness is overwhelming. Now indeed I understand the accounts I haf always heard of the mutual helpfulness of Europeans in the Far East. Before the brown man all white men are brothers—so? Most gratefully do I accept your offer—if Mr Brand is inclined to enter my employment, of course. His wishes must not be ignored. But he may be less disinclined to transfer his services if I point out to him that at all times when he is not specially occupied on my business, it is my wish he shall place himself at your disposal."

"Uncommonly good of you!" said Peter heartily. "As far as I can see, he'll have a good deal of spare time, and I shall often be glad to make use of him. Capital arrangement!"

As Mr Falck had foreseen, the proviso quite removed Brand's natural reluctance to give up his hopes of entering the Bandeir Service. He said himself that he could not have borne to retire altogether, but since he would practically be an extra member of the Service with certain outside duties, he would be a fool to lose such a chance. He was duly installed in an office which happened to be vacant—just large enough for him and a Chinese clerk—until one could be built more commensurate with the magnitude of the operations to be carried on from it, and then Mr Falck, having laid his foundations well and truly, returned to Palbat. His one regret was that in the more delicate matter he had in hand, he had not succeeded quite so well as in the material. Erna's "yong affections," as he always called them, were the trouble.

It must be confessed that the situation with regard to them was complicated. Erna was openly and unashamedly eager to meet Horace again, and showed a strong sense of injury when the days passed on and he did not come rushing down from Thakip to throw himself at her feet. But it was impossible for her hosts to take any definite step to secure his presence, since Mr Falck, in the confidential talk with Rosamond for which Melifred's explanations were supposed to have prepared the

way, avowed plainly, though apologetically, the intense relief which her nephew's absence afforded him. He could not, he confessed, regard the match with any enthusiasm, though he would not oppose it inflexibly if his daughter's heart was set upon it, but in view of her extreme youth, and what he could not help regarding as Mr Berringer's changeable disposition, he would much prefer that they should not meet again until they might be expected to know their own minds better. This seemed fairly conclusive, though in the kindness of her heart Rosamond did suggest tentatively to Peter that an unofficial intimation might be conveyed to Thakip that Mr Bliss's presence would not be entirely unwelcome if he could get leave to visit the capital. But Peter was so rejoiced to find another opportunity of rubbing in his principle that since Horace chose to be a cadet, as a cadet he should be treated, and so virtuously indignant at the idea of requesting leave for him when he had barely arrived in his district, that she did not persist in her effort.

She did not feel bound, however, to conceal from Horace the news of Erna's presence in Bandeir, which was sure to reach him from other sources, and it must be confessed that Horace's very natural impulse was to fling his things together and set off down the river at once. But a wholly unexpected obstacle presented itself in the person of Mr Tarker, whose leave he fortunately remembered in time that it was advisable to ask. Mr Tarker was fully aware that his district was the most sought-after in Bandeir, and he probably thought it only fair that it should also possess the most rigorously competent district officer. Horace's first few days at Thakip were devoted to realising his absolute unimportance in the scheme of creation. Before the natives, of course, he was a Tuan, and his dignity was religiously upheld, but in private life he became what Mr Tarker bluntly termed the bottle-washer of the establishment. He had to keep house, and submit to hearing all his efforts in that line picked to pieces, and to perform a variety of small domestic duties, ending the last thing at night with the compounding of Mr Tarker's nocturnal cocoa. This was not cocoa, but a drink of which cocoa was one of the ingredients, and it had to be cunningly tempered together so that it should neither thicken nor

go wrong in half a dozen other ways, under the bored and hostile eyes of Mr Tarker's Chinese boy, who could have mixed the whole thing to perfection in a twinkling, but was not allowed to touch it. If Horace had pleased himself with dreams of testing further the curious influence he seemed to possess with the tribesmen, he had to learn that his business at present was merely to observe, by dint of watching and listening, the way in which his betters dealt with them.

Mr Tarker belonged to the second generation of Bandeir officials—not the motley group, recruited at random as fresh men were needed, who had supported Sir Gilbert Berringer in his pioneer days, but their immediate successors, who were drawn to the country by pure admiration of the man and enthusiasm for his work, as it began to become known. There were no language examinations, no prescribed training for cadets, in those early days. The youth who approved himself—sometimes on very short acquaintance—to Sir Gilbert's judgment of men, was sent up-country to work out his own salvation and that of his district. If possible, a neighbouring official was requested to keep a friendly eye upon him, but it often happened that there was none near enough. Then the young man made his own mistakes and picked up his own experience, and by the time he knew enough of the language to realise how systematically his interpreter had been misleading him, he was on the way to become an efficient administrator. This had been the method of Mr Tarker's apprenticeship, and he had responded to it *con amore*. Other men might take periodical holidays from their districts that they might plunge into the dazzling gaieties of the capital, but not he. His idea of mental relaxation was to visit some one else's district, and discover how far its inhabitants differed, in language, customs, and folklore, from those he knew best. He had the patience that would ask again and again for the most wearisome historic recital in the hope of making one minute point clear, and he was beloved by all the tribal bores, who found that their long stories never palled on him, though their own people might long ago have grown restive under them. As a consequence, he was a walking storehouse of information about the tribes, and liked nothing better than to have his stores tapped. He judged well or ill of a new cadet according as the

youth did or did not seek to pick his brains when they were smoking together in the evening.

This test Horace passed triumphantly, and Mr Tarker, long since pessimistic on the subject of "the young men of the present day," began to have hopes of him. He noticed also the peculiar attraction that Mr Bliss seemed to have for the natives—this was old Dakai's part of the country, and she had her own ways of sending intelligence thither. Fishing judiciously, Mr Tarker was informed by a plain-spoken but uncommunicative chief that the tribe liked the young Tuan "because he had a good smell," and accepted defeat for the moment. If there was any real reason for the people's fancy, he would arrive at it sooner or later, and it was quite possible that there was none—merely some subtle sympathy between the ruler and the ruled, such as he had seen existing in the most incongruous instances. Reason or not, the feeling was all to the good, and Mr Tarker already beheld Horace Bliss as his spiritual heir.

This being the case, it may be imagined with what indignation he received the cool demand for leave of absence which was preferred without the least doubt as to its being granted. Where Erna was concerned, Horace was incapable of connected thought. She was here—here in Bandeir—his beautiful, ethereal, elusive lady, and he had not been present to welcome her to the country of which in dreams he had so often seen her the mistress! What must she think of him—when he had not even sent his apologies? To travel night and day, till he could entreat and secure her forgiveness, was the only possible course. And in answer to his agitated request, Mr Tarker first laughed incredulously, and then, on its being pressed, curtly refused to grant it. Quite destitute of human sympathies was Mr Tarker, for when his assistant, still obsessed by his one thought, insisted on confiding to him the state of affairs, he was so far from compassionating him that he exulted openly in nipping romance in the bud. A wife was the ruin of a district officer, he condescended to explain. If he had been consulted, no European woman would ever have set foot in Bandeir; but if they must come in, let their pernicious activities be confined to the capital, and let a man abjure their society until his best work was done, and the consciousness of failing faculties made him willing to decline upon a

snug berth in the administration. In vain did Horace, recovering from the shock, attempt to protest against so churlish a philosophy; Mr Tarker eyed him with a regard which was all the more bitter because of his disappointment, and delivered his ultimatum. He had been foolish enough to cherish some faint hope that Bliss might be some good some day, but it seemed he was mistaken. Well, he was not going to keep any man by force who could not stick to his business. Let Bliss go if he wanted to—he need not think Mr Tarker would be helpless without his valuable assistance—but he would never come back to Thakip, nor—if Mr Tarker's word had any force in the Service—get any other appointment up-country. A district officer ought to be married to his district, and the man who could throw over his district for the sake of a *girl*—unutterable contempt in the word—was unworthy to be a district officer. Seeing Horace a little shaken—really by the blow to his hopes, but he thought it was by his arguments—Mr Tarker modified his tone to some extent. He was glad to see Bliss had made his request in ignorance of its atrocious character; let him realise what the effect would be upon the tribesmen, who really seemed inclined to take to him, if he forsook them so soon, and upon his own career, if it once became noised abroad—as it would be—that he could not stand jungle life, even in so agreeable a form as it presented itself at Thakip.

Mr Tarker had not realised before how forcible a reasoner he was. With keen pleasure he saw Bliss unable to say a word—flabbergasted—left without a leg to stand on. It showed that he had not been mistaken after all; the young fellow was of the stuff of which good district officers are made, or he could not have perceived so quickly the heinousness of his proposed course. In his restored self-satisfaction, Mr Tarker waxed quite benevolent.

“That’s all right, then!” he said kindly. “No need to look so chap-fallen. You didn’t know what you were asking, but you do now, and we’ll say no more about it.”

He waved away what he thought were Horace’s expressions of contrition, and devoted himself to his journal—which was of the kind that would now be called a nature diary. But they were really attempts at renewed protest—fragmentary and unintel-

ligible because of the state of Horace's mind. On the one side stood Erna, on the other the test which he had set himself, and which he had as yet failed to pass—for want of opportunity. Not until he could rise triumphant over circumstances exactly similar to those of the horror which had obsessed him between waking and sleeping for so long—the weird hush of the forest in the sunset, the dank drip of falling water, the scent of decay, and the soundless approach of hostile men—could he feel that he had conquered his spectres, that he was worthy to stand in his father's place. Here in the comfortable bungalow such an experience seemed as remote as it had done at Griffins' Den, but some time or other Mr Tarker must surely let him go out alone on an expedition to a distant tribe, and then any evening might see the scene reproduced. It was no use to go out by himself at sunset and try to manufacture the circumstances—they must burst upon him without warning, so that he might know once for all whether he would respond to them only by that absolute paralysis of all the faculties which is the torment of those who find themselves confronted with emergencies in dreams. Well, he had told himself that he would not see Erna again until he could say that he had stood the test, and it seemed that he was to be held to his resolve. He knew it was better so; it was not likely that when he had once seen her, he could tear himself away and return to the jungle where she was not, nor—he was forced to confess it—was she likely to make it easy for him to go. It was part of her fascination that she threw herself so utterly upon him—for protection, for society, for entertainment, as the case might be—though he did not probe into the nature of the pleasure which her dependence gave to him who was as a rule so painfully dependent on other people. No, it was better so; if only by remaining away from Erna could he make himself worthy of possessing her, he must bow to the fiat which kept him at Thakip—but would she understand? He felt almost certain that she would not; yet this did not in the least detract from her charm—it merely added to his guilt. But there was some one who would understand, and in the end he wrote an incoherent letter to Melifred, which he besought her to show Erna if she was not too angry to look at it, casting himself on her mercy, and avowing not obscurely

that his object in accepting Mr. Tarker's veto was to make himself more worthy of approaching her in the future. There was some use in Melifred after all, despite her uncompromising views and disconcerting abruptness of speech. It was something to feel that she would sympathise entirely with his difficulties, and could be trusted to put them in the most favourable light for submission to Erna.

Melifred did not fail him. Not being blinded by the glamour with which Erna was surrounded in the eyes of men, she put his case far more clearly and convincingly than he could have done; and Erna, with her unerring capacity for seizing upon that aspect of a matter which concerned herself, cried in genuine indignation—

"That's all very well for him, but what am I to do?"

"Do?" demanded Melifred. "Why, enjoy things, of course!"

"Enjoy things? What things?"

"The life here, and the country, and the people, and all the funny things that happen, and Aunt Rosamond—everything!"

"I hate the life, and the country, and the people, and the silly things you find to laugh about," said Erna categorically; "and I think your Aunt Rosamond must be out of her mind, to stay here when she has Bedinghurst waiting for her."

There was no use in arguing with Erna. Her mind might not be a very large one, nor particularly profound, but when it was once made up, a revelation from Heaven would not have moved it. Nothing could ever repair the injury that Bandeir had done her in not being Singapore, and in being the place to which she was banished when she wished to stay in Singapore. Not even the discomforts of that one night ashore in Palbat could make her like it better, and she included all the inhabitants and all the institutions of Bandeir in her wide-spreading disapproval. Of course all the young men flocked, with gratifying unanimity, to be presented to her; but young men did that everywhere, and though nothing would have induced her to confess it, Erna was quickly conscious that in this restricted *milieu* she was not meeting with the appreciation to which she was accustomed where there was a larger supply of adorers. To the eye she was always a perfect picture, but such interests as she possessed were far

removed from those of Bandeir, and what was more, they were so much a matter of course to her that she could not even dish them up to titillate the palates of the admiring young men.

"I can't make it out," said Mrs Tournour-Durell one evening, puzzled, as she watched Erna and her court. "They all seem as ready to get away as they are to rush and speak to her."

"My dear Rosamond, that girl will never be the success you were," said her husband magisterially.

"But why not? She is a lovely creature, and no one could ever have called me that——"

"I don't know about *can't*, but after that barefaced request for a compliment I certainly won't," said Peter. "What's the matter with this girl is that she can't listen."

"But, Peter, that's what she is always doing—at least, she doesn't talk much herself——"

"She expects them to amuse her, but she don't find them amusing——" began Peter. Melifred interposed suddenly:

"No, I know what it is. Men want to talk about themselves, and she doesn't care to hear it. Aunt Rosamond does."

"Young ladies who make discoveries of that sort ought to keep 'em to themselves," said Peter severely. "It isn't decent to spread them abroad. You take care, Miss Milly, or nobody will love you."

"I believe you both mean the same thing," said Rosamond, interfering to prevent the resumption of the sparring-match which raged intermittently. "Naturally a man talks best about what he is interested in, but when Erna is not interested, and shows it, the talk becomes flat, and the man begins to feel that he is not showing himself at his best. So he doesn't care to go on."

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Rosamond! You have said just what I did, only in rather nicer words," cried Melifred.

"Which means that a man is only interested in himself——eh?" said Peter. "But it shows that Miss Falck is only interested in *herself*, too. Got you there, I think, Miss Milly!"

"Oh no!" said Rosamond quickly, "you are forgetting. She is interested in Horace, and of course every one else seems uninteresting to her. I wish he could have come down—even for a week, so that they could have had a little time together."

Peter sat up and looked at his wife. "I thought you thoroughly disapproved of the match, and considered it would be something like a disaster if it came off!" he said.

Rosamond laughed shamefacedly. "Erna might improve—we can't tell," she said. "At any rate, one can't help being sorry for them. And besides, Peter, when Horace saw that she was so entirely out of her element here, it might make him—well, feel that she was really not quite suitable."

"Now which of those do you want me to think is the real reason? But don't flatter yourself, my dear Rosamond. When a young man gets married, he doesn't do it to please his people, or to benefit his subjects, but just simply because he wants the girl. So make up your mind to that."

"All the same," said Melifred triumphantly, as her host rose and sauntered out of the window to join the group on the verandah, "I really do believe that the reason Erna likes Mr Berringer is that he is too shy to talk about himself."

"And that he doesn't want her to talk either, but is quite content for her to 'go on existing beautifully'!"—Rosamond was quoting *Punch*—"while he sits and adores. They are certainly made for one another in that way, but I'm afraid Erna was not made for Bander." (Note: The original text has a typo 'Bander' which has been corrected to 'Bandeir' in this transcription.)

Undoubtedly Erna would have scouted the very suggestion. Why should she be made for Bander? The trouble was that Bander had not been made for her. It was like a small station in India—small enough for everybody to know everybody else and everybody else's business, but not so small that people got on one another's nerves through meeting perpetually. The patriarchal tradition established by Sir Gilbert Berringer laid it down that large entertainments were the monopoly of Government House, and confined to one or two state occasions in the year; but simple friendly gatherings from house to house were encouraged in every possible way, even by allowing raids on the ruler's household stuff when the would-be hosts found themselves short of table-linen or silver. As the servants of the respective households, after the manner of their kind, insisted on regarding their master's property as held in common—by themselves—it will be seen that for a European resident in Bander to take stock of his possessions at any particular time was practically

impossible. The homely dances and water-parties, thus got up on the spur of the moment, were a constant vexation to Erna, even when they were organised in her honour. To wear her London and Paris ball-gowns would have been absurd, and she had not come provided with anything that could take their place to her satisfaction. In the matter of clothes Bandeir was infinitely easy-going, but it was not enough for her to pass muster, she must outshine other people in their own line. Mortifying as were her evening experiences, she was able, however, to do this in the daytime with startling success. Realising the ludicrous incompatibility of the elaborately kilted and tied-back costume of fashionable Europe with their exhausting climate, the Bandeir ladies went about all the early part of the day in loose chintz wrappers, which they called without shame dressing-gowns, and when the heat was particularly damp, wore even to church. Here Erna's stock of wonderful tea-gowns stood her in good stead, and she attracted as much notice and admiration as even she could desire. But she was incapable of playing the game as feminine Bandeir understood it. To all the requests which poured in upon her through her hostess to let other ladies have the pattern of her garments she returned an uncompromising refusal—she did not wish to have her clothes copied—and remained deaf to the indignation it evoked. Not even Rosamond—whose every gown and bonnet had gone the round of her friends' verandahs within a few weeks after her return—could prevail upon her to fall in with the friendly custom of the place. Of course the gowns were still copied, much to her disgust, but every woman will realise that there is all the difference in the world between carrying away a pattern "in one's eye," and having an actual example by which to cut it out. And worse than the consciousness that you and your Indian tailor together had perpetrated an atrocious parody of an exquisite thing was the feeling that an alien influence had entered the community, tending to abrogate its most fundamental laws.

Bandeir began to look coldly on Erna, despite her beauty and the rumours of her prospective wealth. What was to be done with a girl who declined to respond to any of the efforts made to entertain her? When a picnic was arranged to some historic spot—the place where Sir Gilbert Berringer had finally

defeated the Chinese insurgents, or Captain Briggs in the *Golden Helen* had had his big fight with the pirate *prahus*, she would as likely as not never appear. Melifred would be there, eager and interested, knowing more about Bandeir history than many Bandeir people themselves, but she was not the heiress, and the giver of the picnic would be mortally offended. Fewer people made efforts to please her, and Erna became more and more disgusted with the place and its inhabitants. Nothing could have been more in accordance with her father's views as to the part she was to play in detaching Horace from Bandeir, but unfortunately, Horace was not there to be detached. Her existence at the capital, his in the Thakip district, though not so very widely separated as far as miles were concerned, flowed on in parallel courses, never meeting.

CHAPTER X.

PEACEFUL PENETRATION.

MUCH as Erna disliked the present stagnation in her affairs, her disgust was exceeded by that of her father's active and enterprising agent. No one knew better than Brand that the receiving and forwarding up the river of incredible quantities of bulky stores for Palbat was only the least of his duties. Some of the cases he sent on were also of considerable weight, it may be remarked, but as the classic instance of quick-firing guns masquerading as pianos was still far in the future, no one suspected them of containing anything more deadly than machinery. But it had been the young man's confident hope to see the ground cleared for much more positive action on his part by Horace's withdrawal from the scene under the influence of Erna's fascinations, and lo! Horace refused obstinately even to come within range of them. Brand had done his best by writing him glowing accounts of Erna's triumphs, and prophesying not obscurely that they would end in her marriage with this or that bachelor official who was completely bowled over, but though his letters made Horace desperately unhappy, they did not bring him back to the capital. To Erna, who never dreamed of keeping a rule she disliked if she could by any means evade it, his continued absence was incomprehensible, but Brand was very much afraid he understood it quite well. Bandeir was gripping Horace, as it had gripped his father, and very soon Mr Falck would have to lower his hopes to a precarious hold on the country through a son-in-law, instead of the recognised sway he desired to establish.

But for this threatened disappointment to his employer, Brand would have had little to complain of, since Erna's stay at Government House furthered certain plans of his own. She herself was not his attraction—which was just as well, since he shared with the Dutch Barons the misfortune of possessing fair hair, and Erna, as Melifred put it, could not bring herself to take an interest in him. But he knew well enough what would be Mr Falck's opinion of such a piece of presumption as his raising his eyes to her, and he realised also—being enviably cool-headed in such matters—that she was by no means the wife for a poor and ambitious young man. Marriage with her would be a disaster for any one who could not afford to gratify her whims, or who looked to her for any help in making or establishing his worldly position. Melifred was the girl for a poor young man who did not intend to remain poor, and Brand did her the honour of allocating to her definitely an important niche in the edifice of his future. Her connection with Mrs Tourneur-Durell was of excellent augury for a career which seemed destined, under whatever auspices, to have to do with Bander, and she belonged emphatically to the class which Brand earnestly aspired to join, while failing either to understand or appreciate its characteristics. She was alertly interested in everything around her, and especially in Bander, which would be all to the good when she had once been disabused of her absurd admiration for the Berringer ideal, and had seen it as the flaccid, inefficient, unbusinesslike thing it was. True, she had a tongue, and was apt to give it rein at inconvenient moments, but Brand felt quite confident of his own power to reduce the unruly member to seemly submission. She was not bad-looking either, he told himself dispassionately—in fact, he almost ceased to be dispassionate when he thought of the way her hair grew at the back. There was something so high-bred about the slender neck and the three little dark points that he often found himself manoeuvring to sit a little behind her for the pleasure of looking at it. He approved the girlish vanity that made her reject the all but universal mode of dressing the hair in a Grecian knot low on the neck, since it showed that she was aware of this beauty of hers, and wished to make the most of it, and he did not approve of women who were indifferent

to the effect they produced upon men. Ostentatious display of one's personal advantages—a pitfall into which Erna was apt to fall—was indelicate, and to be condoned in an heiress alone, but to be unaware of them, not to sun oneself demurely in the rays of masculine approbation, was unfeminine. And Brand had reason sometimes to fear that Melifred was guilty of this crime. He had by no means given himself leave as yet to fall in love with her—to say that he was inclined to regard her with favour would best indicate the state of his feelings—but this did not at all preclude him from desiring to become sentimental when the spirit moved him. And Melifred hated sentimentality, and kept her most withering speeches, her baldest and most disturbing remarks, for moonlight evenings in the verandah, or sunsets on the river. Brand would never forget that once she had deliberately called to Erna to take him off her hands, since Erna and he were evidently kindred souls. But he expected to have his opportunity when Erna was married—whether to Horace Berringer or any one else—and Melifred was left stranded. That was the moment when she would find it advisable to lay aside her sarcasm and her independent ways, and accept with gratitude what he could offer her—the moment also when Mr Falck, who had insisted so long on treating her almost as Erna's sister, might be expected to do something handsome if there was a chance of her finding a husband in his own confidential agent. Then—wealth and power, and happiness ever after for the deserving Brand, and reflected from him, for Melifred. It was as impossible for him to imagine that she could refuse him as to realise that she was already in love—with the Berringer tradition which he scorned so deeply. To her Bandeir was holy ground, and its memories of Sir Gilbert and Lady Berringer were her most sacred associations.

It was not to be expected that Mr Falck should tolerate delay in the execution of his own plans merely because it furthered those of his agent, and during a lull in the passage of stores for Palbat there came a letter which recalled Brand smartly to the recollection of his duty. Not that it was couched in reproving, or even reproachful terms; it merely recognised facts—and so dispassionately that if it fell into alien hands no harm would be done.

"I confess I see no reason why my daughter and her friend should trouble Mrs Tourneur-Durell any longer," wrote Mr Falck, "but I understand that she is not yet tired of Bandeir. Nor can one be surprised at this when one considers how peacefully life flows on in that favoured district."

Brand considered the letter carefully. To him it made it quite clear that the boredom from which Erna was at present suffering was not sufficient. She must be led to desire urgently to quit Bandeir. And the means indicated was the recrudescence of that unrest among the natives which had been permitted to slumber while there was a chance of Horace's delivering himself bound into her hands and yielding up his heritage. Well, that was easy enough. The means for reviving the agitation were all there, since Peter's river-wall was still in course of construction and regarded askance by the people, though the talk about heads had died down a good deal when it was found that Taip appeared to be the only victim. That was an impression easily proved false. Brand had only to pull his wires, which he did by sending a most innocent message through his Chinese clerk to a fellow-Chinaman residing in the Bazar. This second Chinaman's reputation was not of the best. Ostensibly he kept a druggist's shop—for the sale of the various gruesome objects of his national pharmacopœia—but it was more than suspected that opium and other poisons formed the real staple of his trade. It had never been possible to prove anything against him, but no one could be surprised that Brand should send to threaten him with dreadful vengeance if he found his boatmen incapacitated again from the use of *bang*. What connection could there possibly be between such a message and a wretched tribesman from the interior, an outcast from his people, who hung about the Bazar doing odd jobs when driven thereto by hunger, and devoting all his ingenuity to defeating the efforts of the ruling powers either to repatriate him or induce him to take up regular work? Only Brand and the Chinese druggist knew that this man was a Mahkyoon, and that the crime for which he had been exiled was the accidental firing of the house which contained the village collection of heads. The desolation of a Mahkyoon community

deprived of these ghastly treasures can only be compared with that of Micah when his gods were stolen from him by the children of Dan. The spirits which had dwelt in the heads were left homeless, and could no longer be propitiated with gifts of food and drink, so that their influence would now be hostile to the village instead of beneficent. While his tribe, beside themselves with grief, were sifting the still smoking ruins for any scraps of charred bone that might serve temporarily to house, however inadequately, the dispossessed spirits, the author of the destruction fled for his life. Too well he knew that if he remained nothing could save him from contributing—with whatever reluctance—his own head as the foundation of a new collection. The district officer, who knew that Mahkyoons were subject to special temptation in the way of heads, might institute all the enquiries he liked, but the whole village would swear with one voice that the dead man had fallen into a pit dug to trap wild pig, and there perished miserably. His emaciated body, impaled on the sharp stake from the bottom of the pit, would be produced to prove the story, and the district officer would be invited to say whether it was reasonable to deny him the posthumous honour of hanging his head in the bachelors' house. The district officer's response to the appeal would depend on whether he knew his business or not; but even if he insisted on the decent burial of the head, and saw it done, somehow or other that head would return to its elevated position, in company with any others the villagers could beg or steal from other communities, or acquire by raiding the rough wooden platforms serving as graves. In the old days the criminal would have expiated his crime by carrying on a single-handed warfare against his own and other tribes, lying in wait for solitary wayfarers until he had amassed sufficient heads to purchase his pardon, but Berringer rule had put an end to this. The outcast, having made good his escape, could only do his best to pass undiscovered through the territory of other tribes—to all of whom a Mahkyoon was an object of hatred and dread—and hide himself in the crowd at the capital, there to set about achieving his object as eagerly as was consistent with safety. This overmastering desire for heads had brought him into collision with the druggist, from whose shop he had attempted to

steal a skull which was part of the stock-in-trade, but the canny Chinaman, instead of handing him over to the law, preferred to conclude a partnership on terms advantageous to both. The Mahkyoon wanted heads, the Chinaman was sometimes approached by persons who wished other persons put out of the way for one reason or another, and some mysterious individual—for reasons which did not appear, but were vaguely understood to have some connection with the permanence or otherwise of Berringer rule—wished a headless body to make its appearance now and then when he gave the signal. The chain was complete, and Brand had only to jerk his end of it.

The result appeared one morning, when Erna and Melifred, strolling down through the garden to the river bank to enjoy the early coolness, were astonished to be met by their host, imperiously waving them back. Peter's face was ghastly, and he was quite incapable of stating coherently what was the matter.

"Go back! go back!" he cried angrily. "Go back, I tell you! I won't have you here! No place for you."

Erna, terrified and offended, would have run back to the house on the instant, but Melifred stood her ground, disregarding the other girl's clutch at her arm. "Has anything happened? What is it?" she demanded.

"Murder, that's all!" Peter flung back at her. "Go in, will you? Or do you want to see it?" with ferocious sarcasm.

"Certainly not, thank you," and Melifred retired in good order, resisting Erna's efforts to make her hurry. "What is the good of running?" she enquired. "No one wants to murder us, and if they did, we shouldn't be much safer in the house."

She was doomed to realise bitterly that this was one of the things better left unsaid, for when it appeared that the headless body of a man had been found in the gardens of Government House itself, another on the foreshore near the China Bazar, and yet another in a patch of jungle on the outskirts of the town, the panic which seized the townspeople and the servants was fully shared by Erna. The wildest rumours were afloat of bands of midnight murderers who roamed abroad, and selecting one victim here and another there, dragged him from the bosom of his family, killed him, and carried off his head. People were

even to be found who testified to having met the murderers—or at least to have heard them coming—when nothing but their own presence of mind in taking cover precipitately beneath the floor of the nearest house, and clinging to the joists like monkeys till the danger was past, had saved their lives. Also, and still more horrible to imagine, there were people who swore that they had heard the murderers under the floors of their houses—had even watched, with dilated eyes, the heavings of the matting as the miscreants sought for a hole through which to thrust a weapon—and it occurred to nobody that the refugees of the first story might possibly be the villains of the second. Servants at Government House, meeting one another round a corner, uttered simultaneous ear-piercing yells, and dashing down whatever they were carrying, rushed with one accord in opposite directions, spreading fresh terror among their fellows as they cannoned blindly into them. No man would go off to his house when his work was done, but regardless of the plight of his unprotected wife and children, waited stolidly until all had finished, when the whole number, talking very loud and big, armed with miscellaneous weapons and brandishing rather waveringly flaming torches, might set out homewards in company. They had only a few yards to go, but every shadow was a lurking enemy, and every yell that evidenced their own terror was the warning given by a murderer of his murderous intentions, so that after several such alarms a quaking mob was still gathered, no further on its way than the foot of the steps, and quite incapable of moving on until Peter burst out upon the verandah and addressed them vigorously, when they scattered and fled like the dust before the wind. With surprise and gratification they realised, on reaching their own doors, that they had not been murdered after all, and proceeded to cheer their anxious families with tales of peril and prowess past and prospective.

Fear was almost as rife inside Government House as in the servants' quarters, for Pélagie, the dignified French maid whom Mr Falck had tempted by a princely salary to follow his daughter in her wanderings and act as duenna on occasion, revealed a power of imbibing horrors from the two *amahs*, engaged at Singapore, who were her underlings, that was little short of mirac-

ulous. The *amahs* knew just enough pidgin-English to misunderstand the orders of an employer, Pélagie even less, but the difficulties in the way of their intercourse at ordinary times seemed to have vanished in the stress of the moment. By means of the freemasonry prevailing among those whose minds are naturally attuned to terror, she learned from the Chinese girls exactly what had happened, and a good deal more, and after infusing into it a certain amount of additional colour from her well-stored memory, passed it on to Erna. The natural result was that Erna, after demanding vainly to be found a passage back to Singapore that night, and being apparently tranquillised and comforted after some hours of effort by Mrs Tournour-Durell, flatly refused to go to bed at all. Melifred herself had said the house was not safe, she declared, and nothing could be truer. Pélagie, valiantly determined that no harm should approach her young mistress but across her dead body, was distracted by the impossibility of placing her bed against six different doors at once—four of them opening on the verandah, and thus affording the obvious means of ingress for as many murderers. Melifred, bright-eyed and excited, found it hopeless to impart to either of them the comfort which the steady tread of the police sentries about the house brought to herself. The men were Sikhs and ex-soldiers, and their weaponed tramp must have recalled ancestral memories, since she could have no recollection of the wild frontier district where her parents' early married life had been spent. But every fibre of her thrilled to the sound, and she was aware of absurd longings to gird herself with sword and revolver and ride out upon vague and uncalled-for knight-errantries. She was all aglow with heroism, and there was nothing to be heroic about.

Failing heroism, she did her best to show sympathy, persuading Erna to have her bed moved into a corner, which she and Pélagie, putting their beds at right angles to one another, could guard on either side, the apex of the angle being filled in with a barricade of furniture, which she could not help thinking would be quite as disastrous to Erna in the case of a midnight alarm as to the expected murderer. But Erna did seem a little comforted by the precautions, and consented to go to bed at last, though until she fell asleep herself she insisted on Melifred's staying

awake and talking to her. She was like a terrified child—there was no reasoning with her—and like a frightened child she looked in the morning, with her beautiful eyes dilated and her delicate colouring faded. Peter, heartily as he disapproved of her as a possible wife for his nephew, could not but feel remorseful—a feeling which he exhibited in his usual uncomfortable way by trying to argue it out of existence. But he had his match in Erna. She could not argue—save in a circle—but she could reply mournfully, with a pathetic droop of her pretty lip, that it had not made her feel safe to know that the police were guarding the house; why should it? the police had not been able to prevent the horrors of the night before last. After one or two failures of this kind, Peter gave up his attempts at self-justification, and went off—as though defying fate—to note the progress of the river-wall. His one consolation in the untoward circumstances was the stolidity with which the Chinese coolies continued at work. They believed the tales which were afloat, he knew—there was almost a gleam of interest in their expressionless eyes as they glanced at him—but apparently they thought him bound in honour to hold them exempt from the contribution of heads which was to propitiate the spirits. Thus secure, as he was uncomfortably conscious, they felt free to join with the chiefs in the wonder not untinged with admiration which met him everywhere, as who should say, “Who would ever have thought he had it in him to do such deeds?”

Erna did not take the time to wait and see whether her unfortunate host succeeded in making head against his sea of troubles. She was genuinely frightened, and like most people in that unhappy state of mind, grasped greedily at every rumour tending to give her fresh cause for fright. Her letters to her father, entreating to be allowed to leave Bandeir, were the utterance of a very real fear, and Mr Falck's fatherly heart did not fail to respond to them.

“By all means, little dearest-of-all, come to me here,” he wrote. “I have not yet achieved such a dwelling as I desired for thee, but a hut is a palace when inhabited by loving hearts. I had hoped the visit to Bandeir might be productive of heart-joy for thee, but this, it seems, was not

to be. Forgive thy old mistake-making father, my little one, and come when thou wilt. I have not the steamboat at call, and it may seem to thee too long to await her return. Come, then, overland. The young man Brand, my obliging agent, will make all arrangements, and escort thee and Miss Milly, with your attendants, to our borders, where I will meet you. I am writing to him to this effect. Herewith I enclose a letter to the gracious Mrs Tourneur-Durell, acquainting her with my delight in finding myself able at length to relieve her of the charge of my heart's dearest, so kindly undertaken."

If Erna did not understand the full inwardness of her father's directions, Brand did, and chuckled over it, for the way to Palbat passed through Thakip. It looked very much as through Horace Berringer was to have his last chance of resigning his heritage voluntarily and with a good grace, and, to do Mr Falek justice, every possible means was to be taken to induce him to embrace it. The agitation among the people was not to be allowed to die down—so Brand gathered from his employer's expressions of regret for the deplorable state of things at the capital, and his hope that it would not spread to the country districts. This was a hint to see that it did so spread, and Brand took his measures accordingly, even while he was assuring Erna that there was no fear whatever of untoward events once they were up the river. That he should be arranging to falsify his assurances while he made them did not trouble him, for neither by descent nor by education was he particularly chivalrous. Melifred, he believed, had no nerves, and if Erna had too many, that was only a reason for exploiting them all the more—for the benefit of her father's schemes and the extension of the scope of the Palbat Development Company.

Nevertheless, two nights before they arrived at Thakip, Brand was visited by cold misgivings. Had Mr Falek been a little too ruthless in giving his orders and himself in carrying them out, or had the fugitive Mahkyoon been a little too lavish in his provision of headless corpses? Everything had gone well during the voyage. Wherever the popular imagination was insufficiently inflamed by the tales of horror from the capital, Brand's boatmen

supplied the lack, and though his own dignity and theirs prevented the riverside chiefs who came to see him from discussing the topic exhaustively, there was no such hindrance in the case of their retainers and Brand's boy. But it seemed almost as if things were going a little too far. This was not because Erna nearly died of terror when, in their room at the rest-house on the bank, not only Pélagie and she, but Melifred herself, actually beheld a broad-bladed spear insinuate itself between the palm-planks which formed the floor, and move backwards and forwards as though seeking a victim, nor because Pélagie impressed upon him the next day in endless iteration that if Mademoiselle, or Mademoiselle Milly, or she herself, Pélagie, had been sleeping at just that spot on the floor, the spear would have found what it sought. Not for the first time—as some terrified householders in the capital might have been interested to know—had Brand taken advantage of the light construction of native houses, and the space under their floors. But it was also the case that an armed band of marauders of some sort had approached in the night, with the obvious intention of plundering the boats, and had only departed hastily when he, so fortunately awake and up, had shown himself, revolver in hand, revealing the presence of a Tuan.

To Brand it looked very much as if the mischief afloat was taking a course that might prove very difficult to check. The people were following only too readily the example of lawlessness they believed to have been set them by their ruler. It would be all very well if Horace could be persuaded to calm the tempest in Mr Falck's favour by the magic of the Berringer name, but what if Horace proved recalcitrant, and it was necessary for him to disappear? Brand had horrible forebodings that it might prove impossible to get the country in hand again without employing such extreme measures as would probably drive a worried and wearied British Government to proclaim the annexation of the ruined colony which had so often been offered it in vain in the days of prosperity.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TUG OF WAR.

VERY diverse were the feelings that actuated the two occupants of the Thakip bungalow when the news arrived that their solitude was to be invaded by a party of travellers—and ladies at that. Horace was naturally in a state amounting to ecstasy, though he did his best manfully to restrain his transports in the presence of Mr Tarker, who eyed him gloomily from the first start of joy that gave him away when the letter was read.

"Is this the—er—young lady?" Mr Tarker glanced at him over his glasses.

"Yes—the one I told you about," was the blissful response.

"H'm—the mountain has come to Mahomet, evidently." A pause. Was Mr Tarker striving to pump up a little sympathy? If so, the attempt was a failure, for he burst out ferociously, "Well, Mahomet had better not make a nuisance of himself by going about with a heart like a singing-bird, or I'll skin him alive!"

This was hard on the happy lover, who was conscious that his heart at the moment was exactly like that, but he consoled himself by reflecting that it was no wonder poor old Tarker was like a bear with a sore head. He had not—never had had—a wonderful, exquisite little lady coming to him, as Maud came to her lover, "Queen lily and rose in one." A curious mystical feeling mingled with Horace's natural delight, for Erna was coming to him as though to crown his life's purpose. He had made his choice, and Bandeir, which had twined itself round his heart, was to be the scene of his labours, as it had been of

his father's. He could hardly discern how he had arrived at the decision, for it seemed rather that he had found himself taking for granted that he would remain—even though he had never yet faced and passed the test that he had set himself. But perhaps the astonishing discovery that he had forgotten all about the test served as much as anything to reassure him. Not once since he came to Thakip had he been visited by that haunting horror of the night—perhaps because the jungle and the rainy sunset and the silent footfalls of approaching natives were now commonplaces of everyday existence. It seemed certain that he had inherited something of his father's attraction for the people—power over them, or whatever it might be called—and that this attraction might be most usefully exercised at the present moment. Mrs Tournour-Durell had respected her husband's prohibition, though with many misgivings, and not informed her nephew of the ingenious theory by which the troubles of the state were linked up with his absence from the scene, but she did not conceal her belief that duty called him to take his rightful place, and utilise the advantages given him by his descent. Added to this was a certain—it could hardly be called suspicion, but a certain uneasiness—as to the designs of Mr Falck. Mr Tarker, watching grimly the transit of stores for Palbat, had expressed the opinion that Peter must be mad to allow it—though he confessed it would have been difficult to refuse. At any rate, he knew Palbat well enough to be sure that no man or company could ever make anything out of it by itself; its value sprang wholly from its nearness to Bandeir. When he realised the connection between his assistant and Mr Falck, he ceased his gloomy prognostications and maintained an expressive silence, but he had said enough. Horace was conscious of a guilty feeling that he had gravely misled his open-hearted German friend. Undoubtedly he had allowed him to see that he was willing to retire from Bandeir and cede his rights there to a company, and on the strength of this, apparently, Mr Falck had burdened himself with a large tract of worthless country, and was even now lavishing money on its development in the hope of working it in conjunction with Bandeir. And Horace did not intend Bandeir to be worked in any way that signified exploitation.

It was astonishing the way in which his father's principles, as transmitted through Mr Tarker, had gripped him since he had been at Thakip. Unbusinesslike, happy-go-lucky, inefficient, their outcome might be, but they made for the happiness and good government of the people, and they were going to be acted upon still. He did not ask himself why he somehow felt certain that Mr Falck's theory would be quite different, but he felt distinctly relieved when he remembered that there would be Erna to act as peacemaker between them. For his daughter's sake, Mr Falck would deal leniently with the unintentional deception of which he had been the victim; and Horace, on his part, would do everything in his power to minimise the losses incurred—even to taking over the responsibility of Palbat and paying off the money by degrees. He was already beginning to think in continents—though the phrase was not known in his day—but he did not realise it yet.

It was not possible to make great preparations for the expected visitors at Thakip, since the means were wanting, but Mr Tarker and Horace turned out of the bungalow into the smaller house which Peter had occupied long ago, and where Brand also was to be accommodated. This would leave the bungalow wholly at the disposal of the ladies—and of Mr Falck when he arrived to meet his daughter—and Mr Tarker, still grim, looked on while Horace fussed about, trying vainly to introduce any semblance of daintiness or even comfort into the Spartan surroundings. Horace could make a good deal of allowance for him, for he had never seen Erna, and did not know that lilies and moonbeams were the stuff from which her carpets and curtains ought to be woven, but he might have displayed a little more concern over the horrible fact that the only available substitute was the rough cotton cloth woven by the tribes, and bunched uncouthly into some resemblance to draperies by the rude masculine hand.

But when the travellers arrived, Horace forgot his inadequate preparations and everything else. For Erna looked pale and pinched, her hair fell limply on her brow, and had to be pushed back by an impatient little hand—it was not for him to know that no appliances had yet been invented able to keep a fringe in curl through the damp heat of a river journey—and her lip

quivered and her blue-grey eyes were heavy with unshed tears as she looked at him.

"I thought we should never get here—I have wanted to see you so much—I must speak to you at once—something so terribly important"—she faltered, with a reproachful incoherence that Horace found heartrending.

"You have wanted me?—something you want to say?—of course, at once!" he stammered, as incoherent as herself, but Mr Tarker interposed.

"All in good time, Bliss. It will keep till after dinner, I suppose. The ladies will be glad to rest now, surely?"

"Yes, yes," said Melifred, with the honest intention of comforting Horace, whose face had fallen woefully. "Erna will feel much better when she has had her dinner."

"Miss Corvin fails to perceive," said Brand sententiously to Mr Tarker, "that Bliss thinks a talk with him would do the trick before dinner. His conversation is food and drink and everything in one, so of course he grudges the delay."

Horace frowned slightly. He did not like the tone, and he saw Mr Tarker looking at Brand as if he was a new and not very satisfactory specimen. "Miss Falck knows that I am at her service always and at any moment," he said, with marked punctiliousness; "but if she wishes to rest now, I should be the last to want to worry her."

He reaped his reward in a tearful little smile from Erna, and the three men went down the verandah steps, while the girls went into the bungalow, which Pélagie and her underlings had been exploring, bringing to light and criticizing with cruel clearness of speech the shifts and subterfuges to which their hosts had been reduced in the stress of preparation for them. While the maids were bustling about, Erna dropped limply into a long chair. Melifred, with two very distinct dents in her forehead, came and stood over her.

"Erna, what is it you want to say to Mr Berringer?"

"I thought you were so anxious he should be called Mr Bliss? You did nothing but scold me day and night till I remembered about it."

"Well, Mr Bliss, then. What is it?"

"I can't imagine what business it is of yours, but if you really

want to know, I'll tell you. I'm going to tell him that if he will take me away out of this horrid country, I'll marry him to-morrow."

"But, Erna, you can't! You're not even engaged!"

"We have an understanding," said Erna placidly. "When he came to say good-bye, before he started on this mad trip, he said he had long desired to ask me something, but he would not do it then, as he did not know how things would turn out—only he fully trusted to return and put his question, on which his whole happiness depended. And I said, 'Yes, come back—only come back!' So there! he knows, and I know, you see."

"But Mr Falck——" persisted Melifred desperately. "He has never said——"

"You always think you know everything!" lamented Erna, yet with a certain satisfaction. "Listen, then. The dear Papa found me crying, and he took me in his arms and said, 'What! the young man is timid, and the poor little heart is broken? Well, it is a good fault, though the youth cannot have guessed how yielding the father-heart might prove where the happiness of its best beloved is at stake. But let my child remember that where other maidens must wait to be chosen, she is free to choose. Her old father's millions can secure that right for her, at least.' Of course it's all nonsense Papa's calling himself old, but as he says, if he has all that money, it's only natural he should be ready to give us some, when my happiness depends on it."

"But Mr—Bliss—doesn't know that."

"Well, I can tell him, can't I? I shouldn't be doing anything worse than your wonderful Queen Victoria." It was not often that the two girls remembered they belonged to different nations, but when they did, hard words were apt to pass.

"But you wouldn't tell him—what you said?"

"Perhaps not about being married to-morrow—I should have no wedding-dress. No, certainly not. But as soon as we can get to Singapore and I can have things made."

"Not that! About leaving Bandeir?"

"Of course he must leave Bandeir. That is the condition."

"But he can't—he mustn't. You have no right to ask it."

"I have every right, and he can, and he must—and he shall."

Erna set her little white teeth resolutely. "He must promise me never to set foot in Jhalábor again, or have anything more to do with it."

"But he can't make such a promise—even if he wished to."

"Oh yes, he can," with a wise nod of the head. "I don't understand all these money matters, but Papa will arrange it. He will set him free, he said so, from this tiresome business that holds him fast here."

"It isn't business, Erna, it's—honour. You must have heard enough from Aunt Rosamond and lots of people to tell you that. He is bound in honour to take his father's place and continue his father's work here, and if you try and tempt him to give it up it will be very wrong of you. It's as bad as marrying a soldier and getting him to leave the army."

"Well, I have always meant to marry an Englishman since I found a man could give up your silly army when he liked. So it shall be like that, if that's how you choose to look at it. He gives up Bandeir and gets—me!" She smiled triumphantly up at Melifred from the depths of the chair.

"I hope and trust with all my heart he won't!" Melifred spoke with sudden passion. "Give up Bandeir, I mean," as Erna's smiling eyes grew stormy.

"Milly, if you go and interfere between him and me—if you take it upon yourself to give him advice——"

"Don't be afraid; I shan't say a word. What would be the good of his determination if it depended upon what I could say? But oh, I do hope he will refuse!"

"But he won't. You'll see!" Erna smiled again—the conscious smile of one who has never failed when she chose to put forth her full powers.

She was as pretty as a picture that evening at dinner, for the cooler air of Thakip allowed her halo of hair to appear to its old advantage, and even Mr Tarker's voice had something sympathetic in it as he said at the close of the meal, "Well, Bliss must have his reward now, I suppose. Shall he show you the garden, Miss Falck, or do you prefer the verandah? The place is at your service."

"Oh, the garden, please!" said Erna brightly, with a look at Mr Tarker that stirred unwonted feelings in his elderly bosom,

and another look at Melifred which meant that she intended to get as far from her disturbing influence as possible. Horace followed her to the steps with the touch of sheepishness natural to an Englishman in the circumstances. It was beyond measure delightful to be taken possession of by Erna, but he hated Brand's grin, and even Mr Tarker's air of knowing all about it.

"Mind that lowest step!" he said warningly, as her trailing draperies caught on a projecting piece of bamboo, and he stooped quickly and saved her from a fall, conscious that Brand, just above them, clapped his hands softly. Brand was really taking too much upon himself. Even if he was Mr Falck's agent, was that any reason for his behaving as though he had the whole affair in charge, and thought it well to force the pace? For after all, there was no actual engagement as yet, and had Erna been less angelically natural and simple-minded, she might have felt horribly embarrassed. Happily she had no feeling of the sort, as the smile with which she turned to him showed.

"And you have never even said you were glad to see me!" she reproached him gently.

"Glad? Glad isn't the word for it!" he assured her, his words tumbling over one another in his eagerness. "To know all this time that you were such a little way off, and not to be able to see you—to be *starved* of you all this time—and then actually to see you here, looking as beautiful as ever——"

This was obtuse of Horace, since it showed that the pathetic disarray in which she arrived had produced no effect upon his mind, but it conveyed so sincere a compliment that it could not be punished as it deserved.

"It's kind of you to say it"—the tone was still one of gentle reproach—"but it only shows that you do notice the change. And I don't wonder. I shouldn't be surprised if you had told me I was looking a perfect wreck."

"You, nonsense! The tiniest bit washed out by the heat, now that you mention it, but you'll be as bright as ever to-morrow."

This was really exasperating, both as confirming Erna's self-depreciation and ignoring what she had intended to be dark hints of suffering heroically borne, and she was goaded into speaking plainly. He had brought her to a seat raised on a

little knoll in a wilderness of rose-bushes, and she sat down and faced him indignantly.

"The heat, indeed! As if I should mind that! Do you know that we were all as nearly as possible murdered the night before last?"

"Murdered—you? Good heavens, what do you mean?"

He was stirred now, and Erna poured forth, still accusingly, her tale of the midnight alarm, from which he might have been excused for imagining the "great horrible spear" to be the size of a weaver's beam, and endowed with the capacity of moving about and seeking out victims on its own account.

"But what was Brand doing all this time?" he demanded. "I thought he was there to look after you."

"Oh, he came when we called out, of course, but the dreadful thing had disappeared, and he could find no one under the floor when he called the servants and searched. But there were a band of men just going to attack the rest-house, and they ran away when they saw we were all awake."

"Abominably slack of Brand!" fumed Horace. "He ought to have caught the chap! The idea of their daring——"

"But they have done much worse things than that. We have been expecting something awful to happen—that's why I am such a wreck. What with dead bodies lying about all over the town, and even in the gardens at Government House——"

"Dead bodies? Whose?"

"How can I tell?" wearily. "Dead bodies without heads."

"But I never heard of this—at least, I don't believe I did. Long ago, before you arrived—— But this was just before you came up-country?" He remembered, with a stirring of compunction, that the letters which had arrived with the travellers that day had not been even glanced at, and now that he came to think of it, he realised that two or three of his aunt's weekly epistles had been thrown aside with very cursory reading, in the joyful bustle into which the news that Erna was coming had thrown him.

"It was what made me ask Papa to let us come away. I could not stand the strain. It was wearing me to a shadow," pathetically.

"What an awful shame! I had no idea things were so bad.

I remember now Aunt Rosamond did mention three bodies. Were there more than that?"

"I don't know. I didn't count them. But all the servants were always talking of fresh ones. And you seem to care ever so much more about those horrid dead bodies than about me."

"My dearest, don't say that! You know I don't. As if I didn't care more for one hair of your head than for all the dead bodies in Bandeir! Why, it's absurd; there's no comparison. But you don't seem to realise that this is very serious. Was there any sort of panic among the people, apart from the servants?"

"Oh, they were perfectly wild with fright, of course, and it was enough to make them so. We none of us knew when a murderer might jump out upon us, indoors or out. But all you care about is the people—not me."

"I wish Aunt Rosamond had written more strongly." Yet he perceived that had he been in his normal frame of mind, not even the severe self-restraint which had confined her to narrating facts instead of commenting on them would have obscured from him the magnitude of the crisis. "Don't you see all this means that I must go down-country at once?"

To his astonishment and gratification she moved closer to him on the bench, where her resentment of his attitude had hitherto established a distance between them. "Let me come too," she said softly.

"My darling! as if I would take you back into such a state of things, when you have only just escaped!" his tone thrilled with tender appreciation of her heroism. "But I shall never, never forget that you wished it."

"But it will only just be passing through, and you will be there—and when we are safe at Singapore——"

"Singapore! What in the world has Singapore got to do with it?"

"Why, aren't you going there? You said you must go down-country——"

"To take my proper place, and help to put things right, after having let them get into this tangle," he said quickly, as though to prevent her from saying more. "Why, what kind of coward do you think I am?"

To his amazed distress, Erna burst into tears.

"You would leave me here, and go down where all sorts of dreadful things might happen to you, when I have said I will escape with you if you will take me!" she protested.

"But I don't want to escape!" he assured her. "Dear little girl, don't cry. I know it's only your thought for me that makes you say such things, but really it hurts me horribly. As if you would ever have a word for me again if I ran away to Singapore to save my skin!"

"And mine," she murmured softly, coming closer again.

"What a timid little thing it is! Darling, you won't be in any danger in Palbat, you know, with your father to look after you. And when things are quiet again, then I'll come up and fetch you, and you will be Queen of Bandeir."

"Queen of the Cannibal Islands!" said Erna pettishly. "No, thank you!"

He was rather puzzled. "But they are not cannibals, you know," he said slowly, feeling his way. "The bodies were all found——"

Erna sat up and glared at him like an angry kitten. "I suppose that's a joke?" she cried indignantly. "Not cannibals, indeed! Who cares if they are or if they aren't? They are horrid, disgusting, treacherous brutes, and nothing in the world would ever make me live among them!"

"But you wouldn't have to," he said, still puzzled. "Government House isn't exactly *among* them, is it? And you needn't have anything more to do with them than you like——"

"I will have nothing to do with them—nothing! Nor shall you."

"Oh, come now!" he said tenderly, "that's a little bit strong, isn't it? Because they're my people, you see—my business, my daily round—and I shall escape to you when the day's work is over."

"What do you mean by escape?" she caught him up quickly.

"Why, I don't suppose I do really mean escape—do I? I am getting too fond of the people for that. But I am sure I shall often be wearied out with their foolishness and childishness, and then the thought of my Queen waiting for me at Government House will be a sort of glimpse of heaven."

Erna drew a long breath. "I don't know whether you won't understand or whether you can't," she said succinctly, "but you must. I won't marry you if you stay here. I won't be Queen of Bandeir. You must give it up altogether."

"But I can't. It's impossible."

"That's absurd. Nobody knows you are here. You can leave to-morrow if you choose."

"That's true," slowly. Then suddenly, "No, it's not true. I can't leave and I won't. Bandeir is my country, just as it was my father's. It's my duty to stay here, and I'm going to."

"If it's your duty now, it was just as much your duty when you said good-bye to me in London. But you didn't talk like this then. You said you hoped you would soon be back, having got rid of your responsibilities here."

Horace winced. He recognised the truth of what she said, but the light it threw on his self of a year ago was not flattering. He spoke impetuously. "I was a silly ass when I said that—talking of what I knew nothing about. Now I know better. I like Bandeir—well, perhaps 'like' isn't quite the word, but it draws me, and holds me. I want to wipe out the remembrance of the idiotic things I said when I was slacking at home, trying to find some work to play at for the sake of persuading myself I was needed there, and I want you to help me."

"Not in Bandeir," said Erna resolutely.

"But, darling, you don't seem to realise that the things which have been happening lately are not in the least usual. In fact, I don't think there has ever been anything of the kind before—in the capital, I mean. I know you think you would be in a state of perpetual anxiety about me, but you needn't be. In ordinary times things are as quiet as in England."

"I won't live in Bandeir, I won't have anything to do with it. I hate your dowdy women in their dressing-gowns, and your men who make friends of natives! You must choose between Bandeir and me."

"You mustn't be unreasonable, Erna." He kept his temper with difficulty. "I mean—I know you don't *mean* to be unreasonable, but it is unreasonable to ask me to give up what has come to be so much to me. And when it's my duty to stick to it, too."

"Duty!" said Erna contemptuously. "As if Papa couldn't do far better for Bandeir than you can!"

"I dare say he could, only it doesn't happen to be his business, and it is mine. Come now, looking at it quietly, what is it you object to in Bandeir?"

"Everything!" comprehensively. "The horrible climate, the people, the dulness, the—the want of everything——"

"But it's the most beautiful place on the face of the earth. I will show you some of the forests in this part—we will have a boat—when we are on our honeymoon——" softly.

"There will be no honeymoon if you stay in Bandeir. Not with me, at any rate. You had better marry Milly. She won't care a scrap for you, but she is head over ears in love with your beloved Bandeir."

"Don't, Erna! It hurts me to hear you talk like that. I know you don't mean it, but—— Now look here. I can't and won't give up Bandeir, and when you look at things quietly—you're rather worked up just now, after what you've been through—you'll see that it's not reasonable to expect me to. But we'll have a cottage at Singapore, and when the climate tries you, or you feel bored—though I don't believe that will ever happen—you can go there for a few weeks of gaiety, and come back refreshed. How's that, now?"

"No good whatever. But I don't mind Singapore; there is something going on there sometimes. Listen! we will live at Singapore—not in a cottage, certainly not—and you shall come here for a month in the year, just to keep up your family connection with the place. Perhaps I'll come with you, if I am feeling up to it."

He tried in vain to keep out the sarcasm that would creep into his voice. "And how are we to live in Singapore—otherwise than in a cottage—and who is to look after Bandeir?"

"Papa, of course," triumphantly. "And he will give us the money to live properly. He has lots."

"Well, Erna, I am very sorry to disappoint you"—he spoke incredulously, haltingly, with a kind of shiver—"but it's no use my pretending that I could ever give in to anything of that sort—either sort. If you take me, you take Bandeir as well, and here we live."

"I thought you cared for me!" she breathed mournfully.

"And I thought you cared for me!"

"Yet you won't give up——" this time they both spoke at once.

Horace was very pale. "I would give up anything for you except Bandeir," he recovered himself to say.

"Of course, the very thing that I ask you to give up! Well, it's not much good talking any longer, is it? I suppose I shall have to—make other arrangements."

"What other arrangements?" sharply.

"Marry some one else, naturally. I would marry that cross old man who lives with you if he would take me away from Bandeir."

"Erna, don't!" he said entreatingly. "You can't think how it sounds to hear you talk like that. It's as if I had set you apart—in a shrine, you know—and you were pulling down the shrine with your own hands, and showing me that you—the—the image, I mean, was all hollow."

"That's a nice romantic way of putting it. It sounds much better than saying you would like to shut me up in a horrid place with horrid people, away from everything I care about, doesn't it?"

CHAPTER XII.

SENTENCE.

"Oh, how I wish——!" cried Melifred suddenly.

She was spending a most uncomfortable evening, since the weight of anxiety oppressing her as to what might be passing between Horace and Erna was in no way lightened by the companionship of Brand, to whose tender mercies Mr Tarker had cruelly left her. He had not intended to be cruel—in fact, it was doubtless his newly-born sympathy with one pair of lovers that had made him discover for himself another, and resign the verandah to them, retiring to his own domain on the plea of writing up his journal, just when Melifred was hoping to tap his stores of Jhalábor lore. Brand's society was sufficiently boring at any time, but now that he felt himself, as it were, authorised to be sentimental, it was boredom absolute and unsurpassable. Left to herself, Melifred would have gone indoors and sampled Mr Tarker's collection of books; had there been a light on the verandah, she could have fetched her work; but in the kindness of his heart Mr Tarker had thought the moonlight certain to be enough. There was nothing whatever to do but to hear, without actually listening to him, her unwelcome companion "maundering on"—so she stigmatized his rhapsodies to herself—about the moon and the flowers and the delights of such an evening as this, so spent, and snubbing him whenever he required an answer. The snubbing was quite ineffectual. Judging from the length of time Horace and Erna had been absent among the roses, Brand felt sure that matters were now comfortably settled between them, and that in another hour or so Melifred would find herself within measurable distance of

being left homeless. Hence it would only be kind on his part to drop a few seeds of comfort into her mind, and the prickly way in which they were received did not disconcert him in the least. The girl was shy and proud, and hated the idea of finding herself indebted—even to a lover. It was foolish, of course, but it was the sort of foolishness Brand could respect—the evidence that she was the type of wife he wanted. Therefore when her abrupt exclamation showed that she had not taken in a word of what he was saying, he merely smiled agreeably.

"Yes? Do tell me what you wish," he besought her.

"I wish I knew whether it was wrong, just because you want it very much, to pray for a thing that seems right!" she burst out, too full of her own anxieties to give a thought to her auditor. He missed her point entirely, of course—the tenderness of a conscience that feared to be biassed by the personal equation was not likely to appeal to him—but her eyes, fixed on the path down which Horace and Erna had disappeared, told him the direction of her thoughts, and very naturally he interpreted them wrongly. She was longing that the shallows of Erna's nature might be so overflowed by the flood of her lover's devotion that she might have neither the will nor the power to impose conditions, and the dishonouring suggestion that he should resign Bandeir might never be made, but Brand thought she was feverishly anxious that Horace should be refused, so that she might keep her home. He bent his head towards hers.

"I am quite sure you could never want anything that was wrong!" he said—"silently," so she told herself afterwards.

"You don't know anything about me or what I want!" she cried impatiently.

"Not as much as I should like," he agreed. "What I really want is to know all your wishes and see that you get them."

"Oh, please don't talk nonsense!" She moved away as he bent still closer towards her. "Oh, there they are! What can have happened?"

So tense was her tone that it was inevitable Brand should misinterpret it further. He was smarting under the realisation

that she had not merely disregarded, but had actually not even heard, what was practically a proposal on his part; and now her stricken face, as she leaned forward in the moonlight, made him revise his opinion of the two figures approaching between the walls of roses, and read into young Berringer's attitude the depression of one who has accepted, not refused, a humiliating condition.

"By Jove!" he said to himself, "she wanted Miss Falck to refuse him because she's in love with him herself! Mr Bliss, my young friend, you are becoming a nuisance. Decidedly it will be a convenience to all parties if you have to disappear."

Utterly unconscious of the way her companion was slandering her in his mind, Melifred moved forward involuntarily to meet the two as they came up the steps. Erna had the advantage, naturally. The priceless boon of the initiative had been hers, and whereas Horace was still stunned by the shock of the surprise attack, she, though foiled, was nevertheless mistress of herself, and able to draw off in good order. Her tone was alert, even jaunty, as she spoke.

"Well, really, you two must be quite too utterly wrapped up in what you are saying to one another! There are people coming down the mountain—like a procession, with lights. We were so awfully thrilled we felt we must come and see if you had heard anything."

"No, really?" said Brand, for Melifred was speechless. "We can't see the track from here, you know. A procession, do you say? How exciting!"

"I must tell—old Tarker ought to know——" said Horace thickly. "Excuse me——" and he stumbled down the steps again.

"Now if I didn't know Bliss had been safe in *your* charge, Miss Falck, I should have had dark suspicions," said the waggish Brand. "How would it be if we went a little way to meet these late arrivals?—not beyond the garden, of course," as Erna gave a little scream. "What I think is that Mr Falck hasn't been able to wait till to-morrow to get here. I am sure I should be the same in his place."

Erna did not ask for subtlety in the compliments offered her, and readily accepted Brand as a refreshing change after the

insensate Horace—the more so that he displayed an obliging willingness to have his arm seized and clung to whenever anything rustled, or a dark patch of bushes had to be passed. He walked between her and Melifred—who made no claim on the other arm—and for the moment he felt that the self-denying ordinance he had imposed upon himself was really rather a pity. Miss Falck was clearly ready to be pleased with his attentions, and it would have been a comfort to have to deal with a transparent little creature like her, rather than with a tragic sphinx whose mental attitude was entirely incomprehensible. For it was obvious now that Horace and Erna had parted, and on his hypothesis Melifred ought to have been pleased, but by all appearance she was too miserable even to speak. On the subject of Miss Falck Brand was congratulating himself too soon, however, as he recognised when they came face to face with the traveller who was arriving so late. It was not the ample form and expansive smile of Mr Falck that confronted them, but the dark face of a younger, slighter man, and Brand felt the thrill that passed through Erna as she withdrew her arm from his, and stepping forward, laid her hand in Mr Sansom's with almost a sob of joy. "Oh, I am so glad to see you!" she breathed."

"But what has happened to Mr Falck? Is he ill?" cried Melifred harshly. Mr Sansom turned politely to her. No doubt it was merely the shifting light of the torches carried by his followers that gave an apparent gleam of triumph to his eyes.

"A slight attack of fever—nothing more," he assured her. "But when I found he was anxious lest Miss Falck should be alarmed if he did not arrive at the appointed time, I offered at once to come in his place—though I knew how inadequate I should be as a substitute."

Erna's face said so eloquently that she considered the substitute fully adequate that Melifred was silent in despair. This second blow seemed to have robbed her of all power of action. Without being able to protest, she heard Erna overruling Sansom's intention of going straight to the smaller house. He must have his supper at the bungalow, she declared, that they might sit round and talk to him while he ate, and she imposed her will even on Mr Tarker when he appeared. As became one

of the old school of Bandeir officials, Mr Tarker felt it his duty to keep any member of the Sansom family at a severe distance, but he was like wax in Erna's hands. Very naturally, he was utterly at a loss to comprehend her tactics, but Horace was not. It was obviously his business to arrange for the accommodation of the new arrivals, and as he went and came, beset at every step by his boy, or Mr Tarker's boy, or Brand's boy, clutching at his sleeve and excitedly demanding orders or offering suggestions, he realised that Erna had already found the opportunity of carrying out the intention she had declared to him. She was "making other arrangements."

Failing Mr Falck, it fell of course to Mr Tarker to return to the bungalow and assure the safety of the ladies for the night, while the younger men—an ill-assorted trio—went down to the cottage. Not even Erna's very obvious flirtation with Sansom had availed to restore Horace to his normal state of mind. He still went about like a man half stunned, seeing and hearing things done by an automaton in his own likeness. Sometimes he had a dreary consciousness that Sansom and Brand were exchanging signs or glances with respect to him, but even that did not succeed in waking him. Mechanically he showed them their rooms and performed whatever else would occur to him of the duties of a host, then thankfully betook himself to the sitting-room, where his own bed had been placed.

"My word! that chap has had a nasty knock!" said Brand to Sansom in the morning. They had strolled out independently, each from his own end of the cottage verandah, to enjoy the glory of the mountain dawn, and had now gravitated together, making use of the time which they were supposed to be devoting to a swim in the river to concert future plans.

"Never saw a man so bowled over," agreed Sansom. "About as cheerful as a death's-head to be in the house with."

He stopped abruptly, and he and Brand looked at one another. Neither cared to venture without further assurance on ground that might prove dangerous. Brand, with less at stake, took the first step.

"The fair Erna doesn't look like wasting time," he said.

"Just as well to make things clear to all parties," said Sansom, with a wary eye on him.

"Oh, far better!" said Brand, and as between the two of them the situation was regularised and accepted from thenceforward.

"Before we go on to other things"—there was a hint of relief in Sansom's tone—"what do you think of this?"

He took something out of a small round tin—which had evidently once held a medicine-bottle—from his pocket, and began to unroll a strip of coarse native cloth. When the unwrapping was finished, he held out what had been the core of the little parcel, taking care not to touch it with his bare fingers.

"A poisoned arrow!" said Brand, looking at the tiny thing with awe.

"Just so—shot at Falck by a chap with a *sumpitan*. I saw the *sumpitan* lifted, and knocked Falck down. This stuck in the tree by which he had been standing, just the height of his eye. I fired at the chap and wounded him, and then turned out the dogs after him."

"Then that's what really happened to Mr Falck!"

"Well, I said he had fever, and so he has. Head got a nasty crack from the tree-root when he fell. Unfortunate, of course, but as I told him when he began to grumble, there was no time to knock him down gently."

Brand doubted also whether there had been any desire to do so. He even began to wonder whether the wielder of the blow-pipe had been subsidised by Mr Sansom. Just to clarify his ideas on the subject, he put a tentative question. "Little way they have in Palbat—to shoot poisoned arrows at Tuans?" he asked.

"Oh, Palbat ain't run on Berringer lines, you must remember. It's really amazing what Falck has got done since he's been there. If you saw Falckenheim—he calls it the Villa; I call it a fortress—you'd know the work couldn't have been carried through in the time without a good bit of hustling—what our friends here would call slave-driving. And there's been a little feeling about it—tribesmen complained the women weren't allowed time to cultivate the fields."

In his own mind Brand absolved the speaker. Mr Falck was evidently bent on making history in Palbat, and was succeeding.

What with this and the unrest he was diligently propagating in Bandeir, it looked as though he would have his hands full before long.

"Must have been jolly glad you were to the fore at that particular moment," he observed.

"Well, that was a bit of luck I'm free to confess he didn't deserve," said Sansom frankly. "He thought, I fancy, that he'd as soon be out of the neighbourhood if a certain friend of ours had to be got rid of, so he wrote suggesting that I should come and look after things in Palbat while he took his daughter back to Singapore—and started her off home, no doubt, only he didn't say that. We were to pass one another on the journey, of course—preferably at sea. But I knew a trick worth two of that, so I didn't wait to write, but came off at once when the steamer sailed. You should have seen Papa Falck's face when he saw me, and recognised he had been too clever by half! And now he can't say a word—not even when his preserver respectfully desires to become his son-in-law! I was afraid he had bested me about getting here, though—I wanted to arrive before Miss Falck's momentous interview with our friend B., and couldn't manage it. But there's no harm done, happily. You think he's properly turned down, don't you?"

"Stamped on—squashed—flattened out," acquiesced Brand.

"That's all right, then. I don't mind saying that his elimination will suit my book every bit as well as it will my respected partner's. By the bye, I suppose you have no feeling in his favour? Nothing to break your heart about—eh?"

"Quite the contrary."

"Curious how thoroughly such a very innocent young man has managed to get himself disliked! Well, then, it is proposed and seconded that Horatio Berringer, Esq., being so unfortunately constituted as to have made himself a general nuisance, shall be assisted to drop out. Carried unanimously. The Court proceeds to deliberate on the manner of carrying out the sentence. Have you anything particularly neat to suggest? I can tell you it was rather a temptation when I took this"—he indicated the arrow, which he was wrapping up again before restoring it to its case—"out of my pocket going

to bed last night. One little prick and the thing would be done, and he was in the next room to me. I could almost have done it through the matting of the wall. But I resisted it. I was not sure of the reputation of these tribesmen here—whether it was certain enough that they would get the blame.”

“Jolly good job you didn’t. They don’t use poison of that colour—and nowadays hardly any at all.”

“Then my little friend can go back where he came from, and live to fight another day,” and Sansom restored the box to his pocket. “Oh no, I don’t intend to use him on old Falck’s skin”—as he caught Brand’s eye—“only on his feelings, in case he turns rusty when his preserver indicates the reward he thinks appropriate, you know. Well, what’s your idea of the punishment to fit the crime?”

“Depends entirely on how much time we have,” said Brand thoughtfully. “If he took it into his head to go down the river and make himself known at once, there would be nothing for it but a boat accident.”

“Worst of boat accidents is that the wrong people have such a way of getting saved—and it might arouse comment if you were seen holding the inoffensive Bliss’s head under water,” said Sansom, in the tone of an honest man unfairly faced with difficulties. “Is he likely to be starting off down-country one time?”

“Last night I thought he was, but I believe he’s thinking better of it now. He was writing a letter when I looked into his room—fearfully determined about it, you know.”

“A letter—to Miss Falck?” sharply.

“I never thought of that. No, it can’t be to her, for he said he should ask me to take it down with me. It’s to old Tournour, about making himself known, of course. He has realised that it wouldn’t be quite the thing to spring himself upon Bander without giving notice—and this letter is the notice, cue for the government to kill the fatted calf, and all that.”

“Well, this gives us a little time—eh?”

“Quite so—particularly since the letter won’t get further than the bottom of the river. We ought to be able to hit on something.”

“Falck has hit on something very spicy indeed,” said Sansom,

lowering his voice. "See whether you think it can be managed." He spoke low and eagerly, and when he had finished, stepped back and looked at Brand. "Well, what do you say? Neat, isn't it?"

"What I like is the way it polishes off poor old Tourneur at the same time as his beloved nephew," said Brand admiringly. "Neatest thing I ever heard."

"How do these Germans find out all these sort of things?" Sansom was becoming quite garrulous. "I'd never heard of it, and I've lived out here all my life. Falck said some old professor—never set a foot outside Germany—has written a book about it. And it's true, too—for I asked my boy. At least, I didn't ask him, or he would have denied the whole thing—but when he saw I knew all about it, he didn't mind admitting it. You Germans have a way of ferreting out queer things, I will say that for you."

"I am English—you forget," said Brand quickly.

"All right—never forget in business hours, you know. Well, you think the trick will work all right?"

"Not here. These tribesmen would never believe that or anything else against him. I got it out of old Tarker yesterday that they make a little god of Bliss—other tribes beginning to give trouble by wanting to come and settle in the district so as to be near him. Fact, it struck me that either the attraction the Berringers have for them is coming out unconsciously, or they know who he is."

"Can that be it?" demanded Sansom, with quick suspicion.

"Don't see how it can. Who should have told them?"

"Does Tarker know?"

"Not he. Thinks the attraction is the result of his teaching grafted on a naturally promising disposition. Bliss is beginning where his preceptor leaves off, you see."

"Well, I suppose so. But at any rate, I see we can't risk any strong measures here. And how in the world are we to get him into any other district?"

"The fellows for us are the Mahkyoons," said Brand promptly. "They are so much disliked that next to no news gets to 'em from the other tribes, though all the rest have probably heard by this time of the nice young Tuan at Thakip. And you

remember we have one Mahkyoon who has done a good deal for us already. I can put him under an eternal obligation, and start him on a fresh career of crime in our interests, by giving him a passage up the river in one of our boats for himself and his—er—collection."

"His collection?" repeated Sansom. "Oh, I see—good joke! But you'll have to see that they're jolly well packed—eh?"

"Rather! don't want the whole show given away. He must have got enough by this time to make his tribe bow down and worship him. All he wants is to get 'em safe back."

"But can you spare him yet?"

"Perfectly well. The thing is on its own feet now. Every robber and murderer diverts suspicion from himself—as he imagines—by chopping off t'other fellow's head and making away with it, and every fresh case makes things worse for Tournour. Tell you the truth, I was getting a bit nervous, things were going so swimmingly, and I shall be just as glad to have the Mahkyoon and his heads out of the way. Failing him and them, you see, whatever may come out, the thing has no beginning—nothing to account for the first few bodies found."

"Well, that's all right, I can see that. You get your Mahkyoon home and he sets the story going. But how does that help us? We've got to get Bliss into the middle of it."

"Warcup, in the Mahkyoon country, has got to suffer in the good cause, I'm afraid. Jolly uncomfortable for him, but you can make it up to him when you take over Bandeir. Every Mahkyoon is a dab at poisons, you know, and our particular specimen knows of something that has rather a nasty effect on the water-supply. I know, because in the glow of his first gratitude to me for putting him on to so many heads, he sent a message through the Chinaman offering it to me for the benefit of any particular enemy I might have. It wouldn't kill, so long as it was used with discretion, he said, but it would give the enemy quite as bad a time as I could wish."

"Then Warcup will have to go sick?"

"Warcup will have to go sick, and some one else will have to get up there to be a moral support for Carstairs, who would go off his head with bravery and determination and responsibility if he found himself left to look after the Mahkyoons all alone.

They are short-handed in the Service just now, and all the men there are are kept busy in the river district. I don't belong to the Service, and I may not be up to much, but I think I might just be able to back up Carstairs"—with excessive modesty. "And when I am once on my way, it'll go hard if I can't think of some excuse for getting Bliss as far as the Mahkyoon country too—even if I have to be held up and send a piteous request to him for assistance."

"You'll do it! But you haven't much time."

"Very little time indeed. The thing will be to come upon him and rush him off his feet when he is just wondering why he doesn't get an answer to his letter, and before he can write another. Well, one must leave *some* things to the spur of the moment. We've got the main details settled now, anyhow."

"Good job. But hurry things up as much as you can. I don't want him to slip through our fingers. My word! isn't it a mercy to put a thing like that out of its misery?" he pointed a derisive finger behind the screen of greenery at Horace, who had realised that his guests were being rather long over their bathe, and was coming to see whether they had got into difficulties. He was certainly not looking happy this morning, nor particularly heroic—in spite of the gallant fight he had fought and won the night before—but his frame of mind was by no means so abject as it appeared to Sansom's biassed eyes. In point of fact, Erna's preposterous demand had awakened in him a very human and healthy resentment, which was fast substituting the cruel clearness of daylight for the dim religious light in which he had been wont to regard her. As he said to her, she had deliberately destroyed the image he had reared of her in his mind—and instead of being marble, the fallen idol was seen to be only plaster.

"I just want to say"—said Melifred breathlessly, with the best intentions in the world, before they parted—"that I am so dreadfully sorry about—what happened last night. I made Erna tell me"—with some embarrassment, as he looked at her coldly. "She will soon be sorry, I am really sure she will, and then I will let you know—at once——"

So this was what Miss Corvin had been manœuvring for—

she had insisted on walking, instead of being carried in a chair like Erna, when he and Mr Tarker set out to escort the Palbat travellers on their way towards the hill-station of Peveril, where the next night was to be spent; and now she had succeeded in dropping behind with him, and forcing herself into his private affairs! Horace spoke quite as coldly as he looked. "Thank you, I won't trouble you."

"It's no trouble at all." Between agitation and the steepness of the path, Melifred's breath was coming in gusts, rather than gasps. "I do so want you to be happy—because of Bandeir, you know—and you are Aunt Rosamond's nephew—and Erna is so pretty, isn't she?—and she can be so sweet when she likes—and Mr Falck will be so terribly disappointed——" Her eyes wandered inevitably to Mr Sansom beside Erna's chair in front, and Horace's followed them, and did not find the spectacle a soothing one. The iron had gone very deep last night.

"I am extremely indebted to you——" he began, but failed to keep up the formal tone. "Oh, I am sure you mean awfully well, but this is between Erna and me. She has made it quite clear that she doesn't wish to have anything to do with Bandeir——"

"It's just that she has taken such a dislike to it—so unfortunate," murmured Melifred.

"She certainly has; it is most unfortunate. Because of course——" "That's rather good!" thought Melifred indignantly—"Bandeir and I cannot be separated——"

"Of course not. You are Berringer of Bandeir," said Melifred heartily, and gloried for once in being high-flown.

"If you choose to put it like that. At any rate, Erna knows that if she takes me she takes Bandeir, and she must do it of her own free will. I don't want her persuaded or argued into it by any one else."

"But then she might never do it!" protested Melifred.

"That would be better than doing it against her will, with the full intention of shirking the obligation as far as possible." Melifred looked at him in surprise. Had one night of disenchantment taught him to read Erna as surely as this? "So you will understand, please, that the best thing you can do is to leave her entirely to herself," concluded young Berringer magisterially, "and I beg you will do it."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRAITOR'S WAY.

BRAND was already on his way down the river when Melifred found her proffered help so cavalierly received, for he had no time to let the grass grow under his feet. The first thing to do was to put his travelling writing-case convenient to his hand as he reclined under the grass roof of the boat. They were approaching a sufficiently difficult rapid, ending in an imposing whirlpool—bottomless, of course—and the natural result was that as the boat tilted under the pressure of the current, the writing-case shot out. For a moment the stiff ends of the thatch kept it poised on the gunwale, and Brand held his breath, for he had set his heart on not helping things by so much as the jerk of an elbow; but the gunwale dipped a little further—so near the water's edge that he had to fling himself the other way to keep the boat from capsizing—and when he looked round again, the box was gone. That was a good omen, and he went on with gusto to take the obvious steps of blaming his boy for the loss, and threatening to make him dive into the whirlpool to retrieve the case and its contents. The task was so plainly impossible, however, that he allowed himself to be placated, and the injured boy was too much relieved by his escape to brood unduly over the injustice inflicted on him. At the boat-station Brand paused to cast an eye over the boats ready to go up the river with stores for Palbat, and desired the Chinaman in charge to delay their start till the morrow. A native belonging to one of the up-country tribes who had been doing odd jobs in unloading at the Company's wharf in the town had turned home-sick, he said, and was no earthly good to any-

body. He had better have a passage as far as the boats went, with the stock of odds and ends he had accumulated out of his wages, for it was worth while stretching a point to produce a good impression on the tribe. The reason given appealed to the Chinaman, who would have been made suspicious at once by any suggestion of benevolence, and the way was prepared for the Mahkyoon's restoration to his people.

Having called at Government House and reported that he had handed over his charges in good health to Mr Falck's representative, Brand strolled down to the China Bazar. He had noticed in the Thakip jungle a particular kind of beetle which looked to him remarkably like one in which the Chinese medical mind discerns rare curative powers, and in a little box in his pocket he had brought back a specimen, which his boy assured him would be highly prized by Mr Ong the druggist. So highly did Mr Ong value it that he bowed out with hurried politeness and evident agitation the customers who were in his shop, that he might the better wrestle with the lordly young Tuan who had marched in as if the place belonged to him, and in his half-bullying, half-teasing way first offered and then refused to tell where and how he had managed to get hold of so priceless an object. The beetle had passed into Mr Ong's possession when at last he escorted "Tuan Belendi" honourably to the door, and he had secured also sufficient information as to its habitat to despatch a native hanger-on up the river to seek for further specimens. The very lengthy and detailed instructions this man received were no doubt to be accounted for by the difficulty of tracking the elusive beetle to its lair, and extricating it when tracked.

After this beginning there came, inevitably, a break of a few days during which nothing much could be done. Brand kept himself in evidence by giving help here and there in the government offices, while complaining bitterly of the softness of his own job, and throwing out dark hints that he would be driven to undertake a hunting expedition somewhere to keep him from being bored to death. His chief anxiety—and the one point against which he could not guard—was lest Horace should repeat in writing to his aunt the information he had already given her husband, but it seemed fairly probable that he would wait until he had received an answer of some kind, and for that he must

wait a long time. But Brand was aware that he was perforce running things most undesirably close. It took at least twice as long to go up the river as to come down it, so that Horace would probably wait quite patiently for his answer until the Mahkyoon had had time to reach his native country. But after that it was touch and go whether the news of the unfortunate Mr Warcup's illness or a second letter from Thakip—or even Horace himself—would arrive first. Give him but an hour's start, Brand felt, and he would undertake to hustle Bliss back up the river with him, even if he was only a mile above the boat-station; but once arrived in the capital, and acknowledged, Berringer of Bandeir would have his hands far too full to undertake quixotic journeys up-country.

It was with extreme relief that one morning, on strolling as usual in the direction of Government House to see if there was any work with which he could lend a hand, Brand saw Mr Tournneur-Durell coming towards him in a high state of perturbation. Peter's hands were thrust fiercely to the bottom of his pockets, his shoulders were hunched, his lips ferociously set. His frown would have daunted an armadillo. His wife, who was standing on the verandah looking after him, caught sight of Brand in the distance, and lifted her shoulders in a little gesture of despair. "Do please say something to comfort him if you can!" was what her appeal expressed, and Brand assumed the aspect of frank unconsciousness befitting the man without responsibilities.

"Good morning, sir!" he said cheerfully. "Oh, but, I say"—with obvious dismay—"is anything the matter? Oh, I beg your pardon; I know I have no right——"

"Matter enough!" barked Peter. "Warcup in the Mahkyoon country is down with fever of some kind, and Carstairs vows he can't look after him and do the work at the same time. And I haven't a man to send. This abominable head scare means that I daren't leave a single district vacant, even for a week or two. If the people would only pluck up courage to defend themselves and lay hold of the robbers it would be all right, but they run like sheep if they see a chap turn the handle of his kris. We shall have them dying of fright soon."

"Do you say Carstairs is frightened, sir? Is the fever infectious?"

"More like typhoid, I should say—except that it seems to have come on suddenly. Frightened? bless you, no! Carstairs is as brave as a lion and as determined as a—a blind rhinoceros! You know him. Says he will work himself to death sooner than let either Warcup or the district suffer, and thoughtfully encloses his dying blessing. And he will go and die, too, unless I can get him relieved. Let me see—Sayers——"

"But it was in his district that the house was attacked during the wedding feast last week, and all the women's jewellery taken, wasn't it, sir?"

"Yes, and two men fell off the roof into the mud and got suffocated. No, he can't go."

"Look here, sir, let me go. I am absolutely eating my head off at present—spoiling for a job—and nothing is likely to turn up in my line for five or six weeks."

"That would tide us over the worst." Peter's frowning brow relaxed a little. "And if you ain't in the Service, you're next thing to it. Sure it would be fair to Falck?"

"I'm sure nothing would make him more angry than my not going, sir—unless it was your refusing to let me help."

"It would pull us out of a bad hole. But, by Jove! I was forgetting. You can't talk; you'd be no good."

"Well, sir," with distinct injury, "I could look after Mr Warcup—unless he insisted on talking Malay in his delirium, and then I don't suppose it would matter much what he said. But I could set Carstairs free for the work of the district."

"So you could. Oh, don't imagine I'm decrying your offer, for I'm only too thankful to get it. But I'm wondering how we are to get you up there—for you ought to take the short cut overland by Thakip, if you are to be in time to keep Carstairs from going off his head."

"Thakip! Why, couldn't Bliss come with me that little way and dump me at Mr Warcup's, sir? He can make himself understood anywhere—Mr Tarker was saying so—and gets on all with the tribes. It couldn't take him away more than a week, could it?"

"Oh, less than that. Yes, Tarker must spare him to go there and back. How soon can you start, Brand?"

"As soon as it's cool this afternoon, sir, if you like. I was thinking of going up to the Reba and having a try after rhino. if nothing turned up for me to do, so I have my camping things ready. Who knows? in the Mahkyoon country I may bag a tiger."

"Well, don't go and get mauled, or Carstairs will certainly die on the spot. I'll have your instructions made out, then. I really am frightfully indebted to you."

"The obligation is wholly mine, sir." It was the one trace of foreign origin in Brand that he was obliged to end up a conversation neatly with the appropriate response, instead of leaving it in the ragged, half-finished condition that contents the Englishman. His acquaintances thought it a curious piece of pedantry, most incongruous with his usually free and easy demeanour.

The course of Horace's mind had been practically what Brand had anticipated. In his first indignation with Erna, he had really thought of betaking himself to the capital at once and declaring his identity. But a night's reflection showed him that it would hardly be fair to his uncle to spring such a mine upon him without warning, and he therefore wrote the letter which was destined not to arrive, putting himself at Peter's disposal, and leaving him to decide when and how he should make himself known to Bandeir. The lack of any response worried as much as it surprised him. He was anxious to make his attitude clear to Erna by taking an irrevocable step, and he had also an uneasy feeling that he was failing in his duty by lingering in this pleasant backwater of Thakip, instead of setting himself to cope with the more complex problems down-country. It was as though the break with Erna had opened his eyes to other things than her character; he saw his own shrinking from responsibility, his excuses for evading it, as pure and simple cowardice, and the reproach irked him until he could remove it.

He was on the point of writing again to his uncle, since the lapse of time made it plain that his letter must have miscarried, and was merely hesitating whether to write to his aunt instead, when the mystery was solved and the hesitation

ended by the appearance of Brand. He came tramping up between the rose-bushes, waving his hat and shouting cheerily, and ran up the steps with the carelessness of the man who cannot conceive himself unwelcome. Not even Mr Tarker's restrained greeting, and cold reception of his errand, could damp Brand's spirits—any more than Horace's undisguised amazement at the demand made upon him.

"But have you brought me no answer to my letter—or is this the answer?" he enquired, when Brand's flow of conversation allowed him to get a word in.

"Oh, that letter! I'm most awfully sorry—I meant to send you word, but it slipped my memory with all this," responded Brand all in a breath. "What do you think my idiot of a boy did—of course I gave him one piecey big stick afterwards—but put my writing-case on the very edge of the boat? Of course it went overboard when we came to the rapids, and I lost all my own papers and things and your letter too. If it hadn't been for the whirlpool I'd have sent him in after it, but the boatmen vowed it would be sheer murder."

"Of course—it doesn't really matter." Horace was curiously discomposed.

"Nothing important, I hope? Putting in for leave—eh? But you've had plenty of time to send another letter. I met your boat just about half-way."

"I didn't write another—it never struck me, somehow——"

"Well, you can now, anyhow—and the answer will be coming up to meet you by the time you get back. You couldn't have the heart to take leave at this moment, anyhow, and leave me to wander all by my little lonesome."

"No, I suppose—oh no, of course not. Yes, I'll write again, and it can go by the next boat down."

"I don't care for this fellow Brand," said Mr Tarker gloomily, when he and Horace were alone after the guest had gone to his room. "Who is he?"

"I really don't know, sir. He's one of the people you never seem to find out very much about, you see. He was at Griffins' Den when I came—that's all I know."

"Take a fancy to you?"

"By no means. At least, I dare say I was a tempting object. I'm sure he might have been much worse. I know he was awfully decent when I was appointed here, and he might reasonably have been very nasty about it."

"Ah—got a grudge against you?"

"No, sir!" indignantly. "I don't know why you should imagine such a thing. He's just an ordinary chap."

"Excuse me; that is what he is not. He is what the Malays call *muka-papan*, board-faced. I distrust a man whose eyes tell you nothing."

"Yes, Brand's eyes are like that. Perhaps that's why I don't exactly feel drawn to fall on his neck," said Horace pacifically. "But there's no harm in him."

"I hope he knows how to behave to the people. The Mahkyoons are nasty customers to play the fool with. I only hope they haven't poisoned poor Warcup. At any rate, come back at once when you have dropped your friend there. I can't spare you, and I don't particularly want to lose you."

This from Mr Tarker was the equivalent of a lengthy and affectionate eulogy from any other man, and Horace's heart warmed towards him. Had Mr Tarker looked a little less grim and unapproachable, he would have confided in him there and then, but Mr Tarker did not realise how much depended upon his expression of countenance at that moment, and remained unenlightened. As it happened, however, a certain measure of enlightenment was to come to him the next day. He had seen his assistant and Brand, with their servants, take the mountain path—for as far as Peveril, the way to Palbat and that to the Mahkyoon country were the same—and was about to set out on a long tramp to a distant village, when he saw his local chief approaching the verandah. Groaning inwardly, for this would mean an hour's delay at least, Mr Tarker went forward courteously to greet the chief, who had left his rather ragged retinue at the foot of the steps. The old man seemed agitated.

"Tuan, where is our young Tuan gone?" he demanded, after hurried salutations. "Not on a journey?"

"Why not?" asked Mr Tarker, in surprise.

"Say not he is gone on a journey, Tuan! I met him just

now with that other Tuan, who is not as our Tuans, and even as he saluted me, I heard the cry of the bird of warning, coming from behind him—the worst omen of all. But he was talking with the other Tuan and took no notice, and I trusted he might but be setting him on his way.”

“White men take no heed of omens, chief. Haven’t you learnt that yet? What is wrong about the other Tuan?”

“He is board-faced”—the very word Mr Tarker had used the night before—“and not like our Tuans. Well, Tuan?”

“Curious how these fellows spot a man who is not a gentleman at once!” thought Mr Tarker. Aloud he said, “The young Tuan is gone on a journey, certainly, but he should be back in six days. Why should you fear for him?”

“Tuan, I know not, save that all the other Tuans put together are as nothing in comparison with our young Tuan.”

“Well, upon my word!” said Mr Tarker, a little offended. “Tuan Balisi ought to be flattered. But why not send out word to all the tribes that your own particular pet Tuan is on a journey, and everybody is to help him and see that he comes to no harm?”

“It is a good thought, Tuan. But is Tuan Balisi not your own Tuan as well?”

“Not that I know of. I am fond of him, of course—— But why?”

“Nay, Tuan, it is for him to speak, and not for a foolish old man, whose heart is eaten up with anxiety. While he chooses to keep silence—— But where is he gone, that I may send out voices to all the tribes?”

“Where I’m afraid you won’t like—to the Mahkyoon country.”

The old man’s face fell. “Does not the proverb say, ‘Beware of the man with shells in his ears, for he is a bad man’?” he said dolefully. “The Mahkyoons listen to no voices from other peoples. And the portent of the ominous bird! Alas, Tuan! these things bode an evil day for the tribes.”

He refused to listen to comfort, and hobbled away. Mr Tarker knew better than to question him further, and stood a moment thinking over what he had heard.

“There’s only one person they would consider worth all the

other Tuans in Bandeir," he said to himself, "and that's Sir Gilbert's son. Can Bliss be young Berringer—after all?" A gentle perspiration broke out on his forehead as he recalled various occasions on which he had dealt very faithfully with the young man who it now seemed might be his ruler. "Nonsense! there's not the faintest likeness. But Bliss is like some one—who is it? Those eyes—that way of looking up as if he was half frightened, though interested? Good heavens, Lady Berringer! He *is* Berringer's son. And I have had him under my eyes for months and never guessed it. And never should have guessed it, either, if old Buah Raya hadn't been frightened by a bird's cry! Well, I'm a nice sort of idiot—a regular bat! And I suppose there's no question of saying anything until he gives leave, or Tournour ought to know. Or does he know? Can't imagine his falling in with a masquerade of this kind. Well, I shall have a word or two to say to my young gentleman when he comes back!"

The travellers went on their way unperturbed by the omen which had troubled the old chief, though Horace noted it as it were automatically, thanks to his close association of late with the natives. He and Brand climbed the toilsome path to the plateau on which stood Peveril, amid its forests of pink and purple rhododendrons and its weird gigantic pitcher-plants, and ate their lunch on the verandah of the native-built house which had replaced its similar predecessor destroyed in the Chinese insurrection twenty-two years ago. Then, leaving to the left the track along the cliffs which led to the frontier-post guarding the road into Palbat, they struck south-east. The night was spent at the former Chinese settlement of Hsien-tang, which had never recovered its importance since the rebellion. A few stray Chinese, of misanthropic tendencies or unconquerable optimism, still lingered on the banks of the river, washing the gravel for gold-dust or diamonds, but the yield seemed practically exhausted nowadays, and Brand, who bribed one of the men to let him work in his trench for an hour, was much disgusted by the microscopic result. By the irony of fate, Horace, who had declined to make a coolie of himself at the end of the long day's march, picked up quite casually from a heap of rubbish

a diamond about the size of a minute pea, which had miraculously escaped the eyes of the searchers, and called down blessings on his head by presenting his find to the proprietor of the heap. Brand was equally ruffled by his undeserved success and his own failure, and could talk of nothing but gold and diamonds all evening. A state run on business lines would have proclaimed a monopoly over this valuable district long ago, he declared, instead of letting any Chinaman work it who could afford to pay for a licence. There was no knowing what vast sums had been lost by such carelessness, and it was no use Horace's saying that Sir Gilbert Berringer had tried to work the gold-fields systematically and merely lost money. No doubt the effort had been of a piece with everything in Bander—half-hearted and therefore inefficient. Horace suffered the indictment good-humouredly, not feeling concerned to defend his father's memory on so unimportant a point. The money—had there proved to be any in the enterprise—would have been most welcome to Sir Gilbert, who had suffered during his whole tenure of power from lack of funds, but both father and son would have counted it dearly bought at the cost of establishing in Bander a gold-field of the conventional type.

The next day's journey led them over rolling upland downs—to the European eye curiously devoid of inhabitants. This region was too near the Mahkyoon territory for other tribes to care to settle there, while the Mahkyoons themselves—possibly possessing guilty consciences—preferred a less open country. Not even the rhododendron forests could make this lofty plateau, with its winds and fogs, other than bleak and empty to the native mind, always inclined to regard mountains with superstitious fear, and Horace foresaw a possible field for European settlement without the risk of collisions with the tribes. His thoughts were busy with this project as he tramped along, giving a mechanical attention to Brand, who was talking of the hunting expeditions with which he expected to solace his philanthropic labours. The unexplored territory beyond the Mahkyoon country was credibly reported to be the home of the biggest of big game, and it would only show natural gratitude on Mr Warcup's part if he made his kind visitor free of any specially promising preserves he had discovered. Horace, listening and assenting perfunctorily, noted

that his companion had made ample provision of guns and ammunition in view of this possibility.

They were descending to the lowland again as the day drew to its close, and the familiar jungle was once more about them—at first only in sheltered folds of the hills, then on every side. From the "highroad" they were traversing—the usual *batang* or native pathway of slippery rounded palm-trunks simply laid upon the ground—it was natural that they should see nothing of the villages hidden away in the recesses of the jungle, of which they had caught a glimpse from the last spur of the plateau. But it seemed strange—and when they had leisure to remove their eyes and thoughts from the difficult business of keeping their footing they commented upon it—that they did not meet, or even catch sight of, a human being. Once or twice they came upon fields—the usual clearings made by burning down the jungle—with well-cultivated crops guarded by the sacred white lily in its little mat shrine, but the women had evidently ceased their labours already and gone home. There was no time to track them through the bush, by even narrower and more slippery pathways, and enquire into the mystery, for there was still some way to go before reaching the village whither a swift messenger had been sent on to announce that they would spend the night there.

Never was there so inhospitable a village. It was almost dusk when they reached it, but though the inevitable stench greeted them on their approach, showing that it was fully inhabited, the cheerful babel of sounds—voices of women and children, dogs and pigs—was replaced by an ominous silence. They were not refused entrance—the village was not isolated owing to disease or mourning—but the elders who met them at the gate offered the coldest and scantiest of greetings, and showed no desire to enter into conversation. Brand, who had gone little among the tribes, did not notice so keenly the constraint of their reception, but it struck cold to Horace's heart. He had grown accustomed, when he went about with Mr Tarker, to a special and spontaneous welcome on his own account, with enthusiastic admirers pressing forward to smell his hand and rub it over their faces, and occasional old ladies who were particularly bold or ecstatic thrusting themselves close to him to "drink his breath." The

proper close of the day was an informal reception held by the visitors in the bachelors' house, where the guests of the village were accommodated, and where the population would assemble to gaze and talk and listen. But here there was no eager competition among the elders to obtain the nearest seats, nor did the women and the younger men crowd the doorways to the utter exclusion of the air. The elders brought presents of food, as in duty bound, but without the cheerful good wishes that ought to have accompanied it. On the contrary, they appeared to grudge their guests every mouthful they ate, and to wish it might choke them. Horace spoke to them without response in Malay, and then tried the dialect of the Thakip people, in which those simple flatterers had assured him he was a past-master, but again in vain. The same impenetrable silence and cold dislike met him, and at last, as though disdainful to listen further, the village fathers filed out. Then the servants and carriers presented themselves, all badly frightened. They too had met with this unfriendly reception, and did not know what to make of it, but were sure it portended evil of some sort. Nothing but the terrors—half material, half spiritual—of the jungle by night kept them from clamouring to be led out of the village again. Horace pacified their uneasiness as well as he could, and promised that they should sleep at the other end of the long room, so that in case of danger they would not be out of reach of their masters' protection. While they were fetching in their loads, he paused at the door, where Brand was looking out into the open empty space between the houses. Not a creature was to be seen in the moonlight.

"I don't like this," said Brand in a low voice.

"I don't know what to make of it," Horace agreed. "Look here, let's put things to the test. What do you say to a walk through the place?"

"You're mad!" cried Brand, but Horace was already crossing the verandah. As he reached the head of the ladder, something whizzed past his ear, and stuck in the post beside him. It was an arrow. He came back, smiling rather unsteadily.

"Pretty clear warning against evening walks!" he said.

"They must be going to attack us," said Brand.

"Not if we stay quiet, I should say. They've taken a dislike

to us for some reason or other, and it's quite natural they shouldn't want us poking about in the dark. We'll stay where we are."

"You talk as if you knew all about them!" sneered Brand, reflecting how near Horace had unconsciously come to the truth.

"Well, I ought to know a good bit, after being with Tarker so long, oughtn't I? I don't believe they mean any harm. I believe they're simply awfully frightened of us."

"I wish we could get hold of Sah—he ought to hang out somewhere about here," said Brand eagerly. "A Mahkyoon who was doing odd jobs at our wharf in Bandeir till lately"—he explained, seeing his companion's look of surprise. "Some sort of outcast, I think, but he made his fortune and went home."

"A Mahkyoon?" said Horace quickly. "Down in Bandeir? I wonder—— If he had to placate the tribe for any reason——"

"Oh, you are getting to know—or imagine—a lot too much about these chaps!" cried Brand violently. In another moment Horace would have solved the mystery of the heads. "What does it matter whether he placated 'em or not? What I want him here for is to tell them we're all right, decent sort of fellows, not the kind to be shot at sight, don't you know?"

"How do you know he wouldn't do just the opposite, if he saw the opportunity of collecting another head or two?" asked Horace unkindly, but repented as soon as he saw how thoroughly uncomfortable Brand looked. Indeed, Brand was beginning to feel that his agent had bungled his job badly. It was no part of his duty to involve the whole party in danger. Brand was ready to further Mr Falek's plans to the utmost of his power, but he drew the line at sacrificing his own life to lend them verisimilitude, and at present it really looked as though on his innocent head was to descend an equal share of the doom he had so industriously prepared for his companion.

"All right; I was only in fun," said Horace cheerfully. "Put your bed in this corner here, where you'll be out of the way of arrows. I'll sleep across the door."

A happy thought came to Brand. What if he could manage to slip out under cover of darkness, and leave Horace to his fate? "Not a bit of it!" he said. "Why, you haven't even got a gun."

"That's exactly why I won't have you sleeping there. The people haven't done us any harm, and you might get nightmare and fire into the middle of them."

"Who's bossing this show, pray?"

"I am. It's my business to get you to Warcup's safe and sound—not stuck all over with arrows—and I'm going to do it. But I'm going to do it without firing on the people, if possible. Why, hang it! if they do attack us in the night, they're bound to get me first and give you time to defend yourself—aren't they?"

"Oh, well, have it your own way," said Brand sullenly. "I confess I was thinking of our lives—not these fellows."

"On the whole, I think it's just as well you are not in the Service," said Berringer of Bandeir.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FINE ART OF MURDER.

"TUAN!" said a deprecating voice.

Horace opened his eyes, with the guilty feeling that he had no business to have been asleep. Nothing had seemed easier last night than to stay awake for the protection of Brand and the rest, but this morning it was clear that their safety owed little to his unobtrusive guardianship. He sat up and held out his hand to the Mahkyoon who stood timidly at the edge of the verandah.

"May you enjoy cool weather to-day!" he said, as he would have done to one of his Thakip tribesmen.

"May good luck attend you, Tuan!" came the answer, but the visitor still spoke uncertainly, though he took the hand and sniffed at it. "Is it Tuan Berendi?" he asked doubtfully at last.

"No. Tuan Berendi is inside the house. I am Tuan Balisi," answered Horace, and wondered at the look of fear and hostility with which the man recoiled from him.

"You must be Sah, of whom Tuan Berendi was speaking," he said encouragingly. "Don't be afraid; I will call him, and he will come and speak to you."

But before he could call out, Brand appeared, touzle-headed and in his pyjamas, and obviously and inexplicably angry. "Come this way," he said curtly, beckoning the Mahkyoon round the corner of the house. "What do you mean by waking Tuan Balisi?"

The man went submissively enough, leaving Horace wondering why Brand needed a travelling companion to interpret for

him when he could speak Malay as easily as that. Yet he heard him call out "Boy!" and his servant extricated himself from the huddle of sleeping forms at the far end of the room and joined his master, so that he evidently felt the want of an interpreter. Horace was still sleepy, and his wonder was only mild, but it would have been quickened had he assisted at the interview, and seen that while the servant merely squatted in a corner and looked bored, Brand addressed the tribesman in fluent Malay.

"I expected to see you yesterday. Why didn't you meet us at the edge of the hills and guide us?"

The man muttered some inaudible excuse, then confronted Brand boldly. "Tell me the truth, Tuan. Is that indeed Tuan Balisi, of whom I heard the tale? He does not look like one who would steal children and eat them."

"It is certainly Tuan Balisi, but how am I to know what tales you have heard of him? This talk of eating children is foolish, and should not be uttered in the ears of white men."

"Nay, Tuan, it is not foolishness, for when I came to my people and told the elders what I had heard, they all agreed that such things had been done, but many years ago, in the time when the great kings ruled. With such sacrifices, they said, were set up the gates of the stone cities in the heart of the jungle, where now no man dwells, and that is why they still stand—the spirits holding to their bargain."

"I tell you it is foolishness—to speak of such things now. Did not Datu Brinja forbid every form of human sacrifice, and even the taking of heads?"

"Ah, Tuan—but when it is the usurper setting himself up against the house of Datu Brinja? Of no other Tuan but Tuan Pitah would we have believed that he would complete his building in the ancient way, but all men in Bandeir say that his white pathway is to be a rampart against the return of Datu Brinja's son, and therefore he must obtain all possible help from the spirits."

"I know it's no use arguing with you," said Brand wearily, "but remember that I have told you all this is pure nonsense. I am sure if I had known when Ong told me you wanted to get back to your people that you were going to spread this tale,

I would never have helped you up the river. I suppose you have told it everywhere? Is that what makes the people so hostile? I wonder they have let Tuan Balisi pass at all."

The Mahkkyoon seemed to regard the statement as a question. "They are afraid to kill a Tuan," he said, then came nearer and spoke confidentially. "Tuan, when I told my people what I had heard, that Tuan Balisi was coming here by order of Tuan Pitah, to carry off by stealth three children of our tribe, that their hearts might be eaten, and their bodies buried beneath the stairs of the white pathway, they all agreed that he must die—but they said that since I brought the news, it fell to me to kill him."

"Well, don't let me catch you trying it, or I shall certainly kill you," said Brand jovially. "I wonder you didn't seize the opportunity when you came upon him just now."

"How could I tell who it was, Tuan? I saw only a young Tuan asleep, and all Tuans are so much alike. It might have been yourself, till he opened his eyes."

"Don't you make any mistakes of that kind, either." Brand's voice was threatening. "That was Tuan Balisi in the doorway. I don't care what nonsense you may have heard about him, but that's the man."

"I wish it had been you, Tuan," was the mournful answer. "The other Tuan gave me his hand, and it had a good smell."

"Oh, you think I look as if I stole children and ate them, do you?"

"Tuan!" deprecatingly. "But doubtless Tuan Balisi has earned Tuan Pitah's displeasure, and his life is forfeit—therefore is he sent upon this errand. The elders said so, and also that if he failed to bring back the victims required, his own life and those of his nearest relations would pay the price instead."

"Well, you seem to have got it all argued out very nicely," scoffed Brand. "I suppose nothing will knock any sense into your heads. But remember, I have told you it's nothing but foolishness, and warned you that if you attempt to do Tuan Balisi any harm in my presence, I'll kill you there and then. My servant will bear me witness. If you're sure you quite understand that, you may guide us to Tuan Warcup's."

And considerably ruffled by the discovery how difficult it was

to organise artistically even a simple crime like this, Brand returned indoors to dress.

"This fellow Sah knows the way to Warcup's, and will guide us," he remarked to Horace, who had just been making fresh fruitless endeavours to engage in conversation the deputation who had brought trays of food for breakfast. "Fearful lot to say—that's the worst of him."

"And when everything has to be interpreted!" said Horace, with what Brand thought was malice. He eyed him malevolently as he replied quickly—

"Well, it's not my fault I can't chatter the lingo. He and my boy have been going on like two parrots in some unholy jargon."

"Probably Malay," said Horace, a little unkindly. "A boy who could chatter Mahkyoon would be an inestimable treasure. But why didn't you let me interpret? I could have managed Malay all right."

"Because the chap's frightened of you, like all the rest of the people here. Couldn't you see that?" And this Parthian shot, which Horace could not rebut, made Brand feel more contented with himself. Really if the fellow's removal had not been necessary on other grounds, he would have made it desirable by his disgusting air of being cock of the walk, and his affectation of knowing all there was to be known about the tribesmen.

After breakfast they started again on their tramp, quitting the village in the same atmosphere of silent hostility as they had entered it—not a woman or child to be seen, and the elder men obviously determined to shepherd the visitors out at the gate without allowing them to deviate by so much as one hairsbreadth from the straight path. It was an unpropitious beginning to a tiring day's journey. Such pleasure as is connected with the feat of walking a greasy pole is at all times the portion rather of the spectators than of the performers, and when the performance must needs be continued for hours at a time, generally in the damp heat natural to a kind of tunnel through the jungle—the penalty of a false step being more or less complete immersion in slimy mud abounding with leeches—even spectators might find it pall. And here there were no spectators—acknowledged

spectators, that is, for the servants declared loudly that the Mahkyoons were dogging them on either side the whole day, and even Horace and Brand felt uneasily at times that they were being watched by unseen eyes. The one good point in this was that there was no straggling—nor even any need for either of the white men to act as sheep-dog in the rear of the line; since for once the carriers were more inclined to attempt the impossible and walk two abreast than to tail out in their usual fashion. Sah the Mahkyoon marched morosely in front, armed to the teeth with sword and shield, spear and blowpipe. At first Horace kept close to him, and tried to get him to talk, asking about the bamboo quiver of tiny arrows which hung at his side, and the little gourd containing a store of poison for their tips. But Sah would give no explanation of his reasons for thus burdening himself in peace-time with the panoply of war, while not donning the gorgeous red cloth head-dress, decorated with odds and ends of all sorts, which was the accepted sign of warlike intentions among the Mahkyoons. He professed not to be able to understand the Thakip dialect that the Tuan spoke, or even his Malay—which was unkind, and called forth jeers from Brand when, despairing of establishing friendly relations with the guide, Horace fell back to join him. Brand's temper was suffering from the tension of his nerves. He could not forgive Sah for all the opportunities he had wasted, and was continuing to waste, nor Horace for being still alive. When the Mahkyoon, leading the way, disappeared round an angle of the track, Brand would hold his breath, waiting with a sort of dreadful eagerness to see his companion fall pierced with one of those little arrows from the bamboo quiver. But nothing more deadly than extreme heat and occasional leeches assailed Horace throughout the day's march, and Brand cursed his assistant in secret, and rejoiced savagely in the thought that to-night must see an end of this farce, since on the morrow they would reach Mr Warcup's bungalow. As far as distance went, indeed, they might have pushed on and reached it to-day, but it stood on the farther side of an intricate piece of marshy country, which needed full daylight for its safe crossing, and therefore a small rest-house, well raised above the swamp, was to receive them for the night.

The evening was no pleasanter than the day had been. Horace

debated with himself seriously whether Brand were not in for a bout of fever, so vile was his temper, but since he refused angrily all suggestions of medicine, it was clear that he did not think so himself. What particularly roused his wrath was Horace's innocent proposal that both their beds should be put in one room, in case of an attack in the night, for Sah's demeanour could not but raise suspicion even in a mind determined to put the best interpretation on everything a native did. But Brand had had enough of waiting for his companion to die. What he wanted was to wake up in the morning and find him dead—without being forced to observe the process. Violently he declared that he had not slept a wink the night before—he never could sleep if some one else was snoring in the room—and he meant to have one good night before beginning his duties as sick-nurse. Horace was ill-advised enough to smile at the idea of the sleepless night—for Brand's slumbers, if not profound, had at any rate been noisy—and thereupon Brand rose from supper, knocking down his folding chair, and flung away to his room, asserting loudly that he was dog-tired and was going to bed now. Bliss's good-humoured unconsciousness was really too wearing, and it was a pleasure to contemplate stumbling over his corpse in the dusk of the morning, or being aroused by the sudden entrance of Appoo with the announcement that his master had died in the night.

As it happened, it was Horace himself whose entrance aroused Brand from a violent and well-deserved nightmare. He thought he was on board ship, bound hand and foot in his berth, and the ship was on fire. Through the open door of the cabin he could see the flames creeping nearer, and he could hear their crackling close to his ear. Some being endowed with gigantic strength was lifting him up, and he was going to be hurled into the blaze, fighting with all his might, but in vain. Then he was suddenly aware that Bliss was shaking him hard, and for the moment he did not even perceive that the fiery glow and the crackling of burning wood were real and no dream—so convinced was he that his companion had discovered the plot against him and was about to take vengeance.

"It was Falck put me up to it!" he cried, in abject entreaty, before he could stop himself.

"Here, get up!" was all the answer he received. "Never saw any one like you. You sleep like a pig."

"What's the matter?" asked Brand feebly, sitting up, his forehead still clammy with the horror of his dream.

"Place is on fire—been set light to underneath. Can't you hear? can't you see? can't you *smell*? Get your things together while I wake the men."

Brand was on the floor in a moment, with chattering teeth. "B—but w—we mustn't wait for anything," he urged. "These houses burn like tinder."

He made for the door opening on the verandah, and Horace had only time to pull him back by the shoulder as two or three tiny arrows pattered on the door-frame.

"Now you see why you'd better look up those guns of yours. We must rush the fellows—whoever they are. Can't be far off—these arrows won't carry far. I believe I've spotted the patch of bush where they're hiding. Appoo! give me that *parang* of yours." He took the large jungle-knife from the boy's nerveless fingers, and began to hack at the tangle of interwoven canes and palm-fibre which formed the walls of the house in the rear as elsewhere. A glance at Brand showed him fidgeting aimlessly about—now beginning to dress, then rushing nervously to his gun-cases—and Horace relinquished the idea of leaving him while he roused the servants. "You must go through, Appoo," he said. "Wake the other men quietly, and tell them to wait till we come to them. If there are no arrows on that side, let them come down the ladder softly. No back verandah, I see. We must let you down. Are you game?"

"Can do, Tuan." The reply was acquiescent, if without enthusiasm, and snatching up Brand's coverlid, Horace cut it into strips with the *parang* and knotted them together. He fastened one end round Appoo's waist, and with Brand's help let him down to the ground, so that he could run across to the building at the back which served as cook-house and servants' quarters.

"Why didn't you send him by the side verandah?" asked Brand, whose brain seemed incapable of occupying itself with anything but trivialities.

"Because the gentleman with the arrows commands this end,

and my end is in a blaze already, as this will be soon," curtly. "Can I assist you to dress?"

"Why do you talk as if there was only one man?" This was what Brand's lips said, but in his mind he was remarking that at least Sah had had the sense to set light to Horace's end of the house, and had not—as he had almost feared must be the case—tried to account for both of them.

"Because I think so—and that one your friend Sah, if I am not mistaken." Horace looked at him curiously, then spoke with a touch of contempt. "Look here; don't imagine I want to hurry you, but can't you get a move on? Pyjamas may be all right for marching in, but the leeches will have a joyous time if you mean to go through the swamps in slippers." As he spoke he was putting on his own boots, which he had brought in his hand when he hurried through to wake Brand. Wreaths and eddies of smoke were now filling the room, so that even in the glare of the fire they could hardly see each other's faces, and as Brand put on his boots, he was wretchedly conscious that his tongue was babbling senselessly. Here was his opportunity, and he could not see how to utilise it. He caught himself wishing, as Horace carried the gun-cases across the room and dropped them out through the hole he had cut, that one of the rifles would somehow go off and do the business once for all—but of course they were not loaded. If he could only thrust his enemy out on the front verandah, to meet those deadly arrows, remaining in shelter himself—but he was quite sure he had not the nerve to do anything of the sort. The only thing he felt capable of doing was to fasten him up in a room and leave him to burn to death—but in these flimsy dwellings there were neither locks nor even trustworthy doors, and any man in possession of his senses could break his way through the fragile walls if he saw himself in danger. Absolutely the only chance was to dash into the burning part of the house and trust that Horace would follow to rescue him, but even then Brand felt it was very doubtful whether the right one would be rescued, and his own life was too valuable to be risked on so poor a hope.

Stay! there was a chance, if he had the courage to take it. With a great effort he schooled himself into a show of calmness, and stood up.

"I say, I know I must seem a most awful coward to you," he said tremulously. "But it's constitutional, you know—I had a fright as a kid. Look here; I want you to let me come last—truly I do. I'll let you down."

"No, thanks; your hands aren't steady enough. Can't sacrifice the two of us just to bolster up your self-respect, you know. Here, get this under your arms."

This cool and contemptuous young man was a new Bliss—and one even more to be detested than his predecessor. So Brand felt, raging inwardly as he adjusted the makeshift rope about his waist. He had not spotted the flaw in his plan which Bliss, ignorant of its true bearing, had seen at once—that if he let the rope slip as he had intended, he might manage to kill or maim his companion, but he would also deprive himself of all chance of escape. Horace pushed his way into the smoke, and twisted the rope round the nearest of the posts supporting the roof to give himself a purchase.

"Be quick, will you?" he said sharply, choking as he emerged with watering eyes. "The post is blistered already—must be on fire at the top." He pushed Brand towards the hole in the wall. "By Jove!" he cried angrily, as he caught a glimpse between the smoke-clouds of the cook-house roof blazing merrily, and the servants running helter-skelter into the bush, "there are those idiots scattering all about. We shall have a nice time getting them together again. Now then, let go, will you? and grab the rope. Or do you want me to give you a rap on the knuckles?" He looked and moved towards the *parang*, though without taking his hands from the rope, and Brand loosened his convulsive grasp of the broken canework, and instantly fell with a drop. The turn of the rope round the post brought him up before he had fallen very far, and the whole distance to the ground was not more than five-and-twenty feet, but the shock deprived him for the moment of what senses he had left. The ground reached somehow, he crouched there inert, heedless of Horace's adjurations to unfasten the rope from his waist and send the loop up again. It was hopeless to appeal to him, and little tongues of flame were running along the palm-planks on which Horace stood. He dashed once more into the smoke to knot the rope round the post—now too hot to touch—

and climbed through the hole to go down hand over hand. He had meant to fasten the rope round his waist to break his fall if he lost his grip, but as it was, he could only trust that Brand's weight on the ground would keep it taut. Brand, looking up stupidly, saw him coming down, and then that happened which might have been expected. The charred post gave way under the strain upon it, the roof fell in with a crash and a tremendous burst of sparks, and Horace was flung to the ground in company with various fragments of the building. He did not move or speak, and in the horrible joy of the sight, Brand's senses in a measure returned to him. It was now or never. If he could only bring himself to make assurance doubly sure by a blow from the butt-end of a gun——! Crawling away from his companion, he freed himself from the rope. The gun-cases lay where Horace had thrown them out, and he stooped to unfasten one. Then through the smoke-wreaths he saw round the end of the blazing pile a brown face peering at him—Sah the Mahkyoon—and dropped the case with heartfelt relief that the finish of the business was not in his hands. But he stooped again and picked up the gun, for the instinct of self-preservation was still strong within him, and he had no mind to be left defenceless in the company of his agent. Gathering together such of his armament as he could grasp, he broke into a feeble run, as determined as ever to be technically ignorant of the circumstances in which his companion came to his death. The wound of a poisoned arrow or a broad-bladed spear would tell its own story, without any need for witnesses.

Could Brand have seen, as he staggered away into the bush, the proceedings of his accomplice, he might have turned back and made things sure even then. For Sah pushed away with his spear the charred fragments of wood and canework which were threatening to burst into flame, and even pulled Horace's senseless form a little away from the dangerous spot where he lay between the two burning houses. Then he sat down and looked at him, offering no assistance, but not doing him any harm. Thus, when Horace at last opened his eyes, he found himself under the moody and unwinking gaze of the savage who, to the best of his belief, had been doing his utmost to murder him for some time. The situation was so paralysing that for a

while they went on looking at one another—nothing more. Then Horace, in some doubt how to address his dubious guardian, ventured to move his limbs and even stiffly to sit up. To his own astonishment, he found no bones were broken, though bruises and cuts and burns made themselves disagreeably evident all over him. At last, by the help of a bush, he was able to pull himself up from the ground, and actually to stand—swaying on his feet a little, but substantially unhurt. A feeling of astonished thankfulness for his escape was strong within him, but the gloom of Sah's unwavering gaze restrained its expression. Had he really escaped yet?

"Where is Tuan Berendi?" he asked weakly at last—more for something to say than because he was particularly anxious to hear about Brand.

"He has run away," calmly. "Tuan," with extreme anxiety, "answer me this truly. Is it not Tuan Berendi who has been sent by Tuan Pitah to capture three children of the Mahkyoons, that their bodies may be buried in the white pathway by the river, and their hearts eaten, in the day that it is finished?"

Had Horace wished to avenge himself on Brand, he had an excellent opportunity now. But regarding him still merely as a rather offensive bully who had been shown up in his true colours by the onslaught of unexpected danger, he laughed at Sah's question, not even noticing the form in which it was put. "Not a bit of it!" he said lightly. "He's quite a safe person, I assure you. You might just as well suspect me of such horrors as him."

Speaking in the innocence of his heart, and forgetting that the crowning fact which made such an idea particularly absurd in his case was unknown to Sah, he was a little surprised by the added gloom of the Mahkyoon's countenance. Sah rose slowly from the ground. "I will guide you to find Tuan Berendi, Tuan," was all he said.

"Thank you—" not without irony, for suspicion was returning. "But on the whole, I think it will be just as well if you lead the way."

"So be it, Tuan. What does it matter?" and enigmatic as ever, Sah stalked ahead, Horace limping painfully after him. The sun was risen now, and he soon had to stop to tie his hand-

kerchief round his head, Malay fashion. He was so bruised and battered that all his thoughts were necessarily concentrated on the physical effort of getting along, and he had no time to speculate on the mutual feelings with which he and Brand would meet. Indeed, it was not until they turned a corner of the pathway, and he caught sight of Brand's ghastly face, absolutely colourless, and horror-stricken if ever man's face was so, that he realised his companion had naturally believed him dead. But he was almost at the end of his strength, and relieved the situation unconsciously by dropping limply upon the slippery *batang*.

"Got any water?" he asked thickly.

"Not a drop." Brand was unnecessarily voluble all at once. "But there's some a little farther on. I have been wandering along this abominable path, trying to find the way across the swamp, and I can't. I'd better help you up, and when you've had some water and rested a bit, Sah can guide us over." He repeated the last sentence inadvertently in Malay.

"I can only guide one at a time, Tuan," was the reply. "Therefore Tuan Balisi can rest himself while I take you across."

Horace was too far gone to notice the peculiar tone in which the words were spoken, or the glance which Brand—as though against his will—exchanged with the native. He submitted to be helped to his feet again, and leaned heavily on Brand as he tottered to the spot where the *batang* ended, and the swamp proper began. Warcup had engineered a crossing farther to the south which required no guide, though it was not advisable to attempt it by night, but the tribesmen would have nothing to do with it. In their opinion the spirits of the swamp had good cause for complaint if their domains were invaded, and they and their fathers alike had deferred to this natural jealousy by bringing their unstable causeway to an end just where—to the vulgar eye—its continuance was most needed. Horace dropped down thankfully beside a fairly deep pool, and regardless alike of leeches and the doubtful appearance of the water, drank from his cupped hands as greedily as that unsatisfactory drinking-vessel would allow. Then he sank back under the shade of a clump of small palms—half tree, half creeper—growing in a piece of tolerably firm ground, and motioned Brand on.

"Rest a bit," he said vaguely. "All right soon."

Brand did not dispute the implied order, and looking at him rather uncertainly, went on with Sah. He had profited by his time alone to arm himself against treachery—a rifle hanging across his back and a revolver in its holster at his waist. He and Sah exchanged no words but such as were called for by the gymnastic exercises involved in leaping from one patch of dry ground to another, or swinging, monkey-like, from tree to tree by the aid of the innumerable creepers. When they crossed an open space, the sun poured down upon them, and Brand was exhausted and thankful to rest when the *batang* began again, and Sah intimated that the swamp was crossed, and he would now go back for Tuan Balisi.

He was absent for what seemed untold hours to Brand, as he sat crouched in the shade with the beating of his heart drowning all other sounds to his ears, and his throat dry in spite of constant draughts of water. What should he do, what could he do, if once more Horace evaded his doom, and presented himself alive? At last the Mahkyoon appeared in the distance—alone. With difficulty Brand restrained himself from shouting to him. How had he fared? was his task accomplished? was he sure Horace was dead? But the farce must be maintained to the end, though the watcher was careful to keep Sah unostentatiously covered with his revolver as he approached.

"Where is Tuan Balisi?" he hailed him.

"Tuan Balisi is gone on by himself," came the morose answer. A thousand questions trembled on Brand's tongue. How had Sah done the deed? Was he quite—quite—sure it was done effectually? How had he disposed of the body? Was he certain no one had seen him? But he drove them back.

"We will go on at once to Tuan Warcup's. Doubtless we shall find him there," he said, and in hostile wise they went on—Brand with his revolver ready, Sah with four arrows held in his left hand and one in the mouth of his blowpipe—each watchful against treachery on the part of the other. Thus at last they came to a ridge on which stood a house obviously inhabited by Europeans, since the ground round it was cleared and it sought no concealment. As they mounted the slope a youth hurried down to meet them, worn of face and heavy-eyed

with want of sleep—clearly Carstairs in the last glow of that flame of self-sacrificing heroism that Peter Tourneur had mentioned.

"Are you Bliss or Brand?" he demanded, shaking hands eagerly. "Some of your people have come in—some absurd yarn about your being attacked. Where's the other chap?"

"Hasn't he turned up?" asked Brand. "He was not to be found when this fellow went back to look for him, so we thought he must have come on by himself."

"Oh, he'll turn up all right, of course. All nonsense about attacks. Our people don't attack travellers. I say, I'm awfully glad you've come. I haven't had a single night's rest since Warcup went down with this fever or whatever it is, and I've done all the work in the daytime as well. I'm just going to hand things over to you and get a sleep, for I'm about done. Take what you like of my clothes and things, and my boy will get you a bath and some grub."

CHAPTER XV.

STRUCK FROM BEHIND.

HORACE lay in the shade of the scrub-palms, very well content to remain where he was for the present. He was aching and sore all over, and the thought of further violent exercise was most unwelcome. Far better to stay quiet and think things over a bit. Now that he remembered, there were some curious things to think over, too. Brand's loss of nerve—who would ever have imagined the fellow was a coward? Of course, the circumstances were enough to try any one's nerve—but then that suggested the question how those circumstances had arisen. Who had set the rest-house on fire, and what in the world had inspired Sah to seek to riddle the inmates with arrows as they tried to escape? He had asked some absurd question, too, about Brand and poor old Uncle Peter's river-wall—something about eating children. Of course, if he believed *that*, it was no wonder he should try to kill Brand or anybody else. It was to be hoped he had got the idea out of his head by this time, anyhow. And what had happened to all the servants—to Appoo, above all? However censorious the Englishman in the East may be about the natives generally, he is in the habit of looking for the most absolute fidelity from his own particular attendants—and he generally gets it. Horace felt it as a personal injury that his boy should have forsaken him. Brand's boy had done the same, of course, and even sooner, but Appoo's master had never thought much of *him*. He hoped Appoo had come to no harm—it was really more likely that something had happened to him than that he had proved faithless. Appoo's

company would have been very welcome just now—surely it was quite late in the morning; what was Appoo thinking of not to bring the *chhoti haziri*? Horace was most consumedly thirsty—never remembered wanting his tea so much—and he was aching so horribly, as if he had been beaten all over. Must have barked himself in a good many places, too—and the bed felt so extraordinarily uncomfortable. Appoo must be getting slack—wanting a lesson, perhaps. “Appoo! Appoo!” he called, and the sound of his own voice, hoarse and cracked and absurdly weak, woke him from the half doze, half stupor, that held him. There was no hasty reply of “Tuan calling?” and swift shuffling as Appoo hurried in with the tray and lifted the mosquito-net, but a rustling in the undergrowth which was somehow behind the bed.

There was no bed, no mosquito-net; he was out in the open air, beside a pool which looked tolerably clear just here, but merged unpleasantly into swamp at its further end. Then he remembered, and sat up smartly, for that rustling suggested alligators. But there were no signs of their presence—which was just as well, since he had no weapon of any kind, and could not have run away to save his life. Even a wild pig, in a militant mood, or a jungle cat with a family to defend, would be awkward adversaries to tackle in present circumstances, and he clapped his hands and shouted as loud as he could. Nothing appeared, but again there was the rustling, and turning painfully on his side, he tried to look into the bushes. As he did so, he heard a faint whizz, and something pricked him deep and sharply in the back—he could feel it strike a bone. The pain was more than a prick—it burned and, as he said to himself, “jabbed” the flesh where it had struck. It was an awkward place to reach, but by twisting his arm round, he succeeded with some difficulty in pulling out the missile. It lay in his hand in two parts—a tiny splinter of sharpened wood, and a socket, something like a penholder, of white springy pith, into which it fitted—and though he had in a way guessed what it must be, he yet was conscious of a shock when he saw that it was a poisoned arrow. As his whole past returns in a flash to a drowning man, so it was with Horace for a moment or two as he lay there with death in his hand. The faces of his father

and mother—his easy school and college life, with its working at play and playing at work—his neglected duties and his tardy and reluctant return to them—Mr Falck, boisterously benevolent—Erna, fair and false—Melifred's dark anxious eyes and brusque speech—Brand and his inexplicable behaviour—the tribesmen to whom he felt a hereditary tie—Sah the Mahkyoon. The stupor that had held him broke—Sah it must be who had done this. With infinite pains he pulled himself to his feet, and lurched unsteadily to the edge of the clump of bush. Yes, there was Sah, with his back turned, making the best of his way across the swamp, utterly heedless of the agonised cry sent after him. It was obviously absurd to call for help to the man who had deliberately just dealt him a death-blow, but Horace was in no state of mind to reason. Surely any man would help another to escape such a death as that little splinter of wood carried with it! He looked at it again with a shudder.

"O God! not die here—alone—like this!" he cried hoarsely, and again his own voice recalled him to himself. Dropping the arrow with loathing, he groped painfully to the edge of the pool, and washed the wound as well as he could. The blood was flowing freely, but he had nothing with which to stanch it, though he minded this the less that he had some idea the flow of blood might help to carry away the poison. Then he dragged himself to his feet again, and tried to look at things coolly. He knew that the wound of a poisoned arrow was not invariably fatal, especially when the poison had been dry for some time—but the thought of that little calabash at Sah's side reminded him that this was not so in his case. Yet even where the poison was fresh, lives had been saved by strong measures taken at once—excision, cauterization, powerful drugs. But the nearest doctor was—how many miles away? the nearest European, Warcup, was himself by all accounts in a dying state—and moreover, Horace had no idea how to reach him. His mind was curiously clouded; for the life of him he could not remember whether Warcup's crossing lay to right or left, or how far off it was likely to be. He must make his way along the edge of the swamp and try to find it—or failing it, a native village. The Mahkyoons, who were so learned in poisons, must have antidotes of their own—drastic, doubtless, and disgusting, but effective—and he could

not believe they would refuse to help a white man in his extremity. At the worst, he must tell them who he was, for though it might mean a loss of dignity for Berringer of Bandeir to reveal himself as a suppliant in need of help of every kind, what was that in comparison with life? Forward, then, in quest of a village! before his eyes were quite dim, and his limbs too stiff to move. He took the way to the left merely because his face happened to be turned in that direction—and in so doing, if he had only known it, missed Appoo, who, seized with shame for his desertion of his master, had turned back when he arrived with his fellows at Warcup's crossing, and leaving them to go on, was timorously creeping along the edge of the swamp in search of the path which would lead him back to the ruins of the rest-house.

The edge of the swamp was neither intended by nature nor used by the Mahkyoons as a thoroughfare. Sometimes Horace's stumbling feet met with firm ground, but generally he was struggling through and over a confused mass of tree-trunks and roots, some growing in the water, others fallen or falling into it, and all chained together by long cables of creeper—mostly thorny. For a change, there were open spaces of a sort, where high grass with blades of sword-like sharpness grew sparsely in apparently bottomless mud, and furnished a local habitation for innumerable leeches. It was a relief when a pathway presented itself leading away from the swamp, though it was only one of the usual *batangs*, and Horace mounted it and staggered precariously along, keeping his balance mechanically—when he kept it at all, for he had several falls into the mud on one side or the other. He was past arguing with himself whether he should go on or not; his recoveries and fresh starts were automatic—as though the body were still under the influence of a stimulus the mind had ceased to exert. The jungle reeked with moisture, the air was stifling, and the sun pouring down through the damp shade made an atmosphere like a hothouse. Visions of rest, of cooling drinks, soft cushions, gentle hands, tormented him—they appeared and receded like a mirage. Then he came in sight of the village. Its four or five huge houses, perched as it were on stilts, looked as though they had mounted among the tree-tops in search of air, their verandahs were alive with busy

women and busy-idle men. As the ragged, limping figure made its appearance through the opening in the jungle, a cry arose from the children playing about among the pigs on the ground, met by an answering cry from their mothers above. Then, to Horace's astonishment, there was a rush—of furious women almost hurling themselves down the notched poles that served as ladders, of impish, spiteful children shrieking abuse and throwing whatever they found to hand. For a moment he tried to hold his ground, to parley with them, but the yells of execration forbade him to be heard. A glance at the verandahs showed him that the men, though taking no active part in the demonstration, had crowded to the edge to laugh at the victim and encourage his persecutors, and he turned and staggered back into the bush. But he was not to escape so lightly. After him came the furies, young and old, shrieking hatred and derision, and he fled before them. Had he been in a condition to reason, he might have observed that they did not follow close upon his heels. Even the foremost pursuers kept a respectful distance behind, the women pulling the children back by main force when they tried to press forward, but they were in no mind to allow him either rest or an opportunity for parley. Others took up the pursuit from time to time—women working in the jungle clearings, where the paddy was grown, rushing out with flying hair and murderous-looking hoes and *parangs* to do their part. Horace stumbled blindly on, taking any path that offered itself, in the vain hope of distancing or eluding his followers. Other villages must have lent their women and children to join in the pursuit, or to take it up where their predecessors left off, for there was never a moment's respite. If the fugitive showed signs of dropping in his tracks, a shower of missiles drove him on again. Stones there were none in that soft forest country, but sticks and jagged bits of bamboo in abundance, and unfortunately every village afforded only too large a variety of horrible refuse with which to pelt the fugitive.

The day wore on, and still Horace was limping and lurching painfully just ahead of the mob of persecutors, whose stock of abusive epithets, like their wrath, appeared to be inexhaustible. He was past thinking now—had not even the strength to wonder that he should still be alive,—all that he knew was the impera-

tive need somehow to distance that yelling throng, to get beyond the sounds of those raucous voices of hate, to drop down somewhere, anywhere, and be able to be quiet. So absolutely exhausted were senses and brain, that when the pursuit ceased at last, and the shouts died away behind him—as the mob halted, apparently at some invisible but well-known boundary, and watched with malevolent glee their quarry staggering aimlessly on—he was not even aware of it, but continued his way with the sounds of the chase still ringing in his ears. Not until evening did his failing limbs at last refuse to support him further. He sank down on a hillock beneath a sago-palm—a little grassy island in the waste of jungle—and could not rise again. He did not tell himself that not even for that horrible rout of pursuers could he move another step, but gradually there forced itself upon his dulled senses the blessed truth that the pursuit was at an end. He was alone—gloriously, blissfully alone—utterly spent, since no chance had been allowed him even to snatch at the jungle fruits as he passed, but free from his tormenting foes. As he lay there, his mind seemed to become suddenly clear, and with a tightening of the heart he realised that the scene was somehow familiar to him. On this little knoll, the crowding monstrous growths of the jungle, which pressed upon it as though hungry to swallow it up, no longer obscured the sky, and he could see the moist glory of the sunset—as though a glass of water had been upset over paper splashed with the brightest colours from a paint-box. The dank heavy smell of rotting vegetation was in his nostrils—yet all day he did not remember having been conscious of the smell of anything, even of the villages he passed. He had not known it was raining, yet now he heard the sound of water dripping from trees. Why should these things—scene, sound, and scent—fill him with a feeling of unutterable horror, as though he were at last overtaken by a doom which he had succeeded in evading till now? Then he remembered. This was his dream—the torment of so many disturbed nights in his boyhood—and it had been no purposeless figment of the brain, but a premonition of the time and place at which he was to die. But there should be something more—yes, there it was! His weary eyes, scanning the encircling belt of jungle, saw it peopled with human forms.

The tribesmen were compassing him round — not with the swaggering tread of the Mahkyoons, but with the furtive foot-fall of a more timid, less confident people. They were emerging from the trees now, each man with his *sumpitán* to his mouth, the deadly arrow ready to fly. A sick dread assailed Horace; he would fain have covered his shuddering face, and awaited death without seeing it. But the year's schooling had not been wasted. It was little short of agony to move, but he dragged himself up on his elbow, and held out his hand.

"May your fields be fruitful!" he cried hoarsely, with the most deceptive cheeriness he could assume.

One or two of the *sumpitans* dropped, and their owners clustered together to talk in excited whispers, while Horace smiled as amicably as he could, and held out his hand again. At last one man made his way forward a little.

"May rice be stored in your house, Tuan!" he cried, in a quivering voice. "Is it Tuan Warcopi?"

To the end of his life Horace could never decide whether it was sheer incapacity of mind or a sort of pride that dictated his answer. "No, it is Tuan Berringer," he said.

He had created a sensation now! The tribesmen gathered into a group and talked excitedly among themselves, eyeing him suspiciously the while. At last the man who had spoken, and who was evidently the chief, detached himself from the rest, and advancing with the air of one determined to do or die, lifted Horace's hand shakily and smelt it, then eyed him with mingled incredulity and respect.

"No one is to know but the tribe. I trust myself to you, chief," Horace managed to say.

"Tuan!" was the non-committal reply, and the chief retired backwards, keeping his eyes fixed upon this strange-looking white man as though he suspected a trap, until he was among his followers again and they could consult together. One man was apparently sent off on some errand, and the rest resumed their watchful and hostile attitude, ready to loose a flight of arrows on the slightest pretext. Horace let his head drop again with an inward groan. Surely the bitterness of death was past. Yet to die at the hands of these frightened forest people, after appealing to them in vain in his father's name——! But there

was nothing more he could do. If death was at hand, he could only await it.

How long he waited he did not know, but the varied tints of the sky had given place to a clear opal afterglow—fire opal—when the messenger returned, apparently dragging some one else with him. Horace opened his eyes again, and saw emerging from the jungle a very old woman, scolding with all the vigour of youth, though in hushed tones, the messenger, the chief and the tribe indiscriminately, the while she struggled into her garment of ceremony, the long jacket curiously embroidered in cowrie-shells with figures of lizards or dragons. Apparently she was angry because the messenger had not allowed her to dress before starting, for she insisted on attiring herself to her satisfaction before she would mount the hillock, which she did on hands and knees. Approaching Horace, she peered curiously into his face—he was too dispirited by this time to make any attempt at greeting—then took up his hand and smelt it respectfully. Before he knew it, she was rubbing it all over her face, and the tears were raining down as her shaking voice showered abuse on the chief for his dulness. Here was Datu Brinja come back from the dead, and he had not summoned the tribe to do him honour! Any deficiency in that respect was immediately removed, as the chief and his followers threw aside their weapons, and crowded round to entreat forgiveness and protest devotion. But it was the old lady—evidently the chief's mother—who took command of the situation. The white man's weak attempts at speech conveyed nothing to her, but she saw that something was wrong, and lifting him slightly, she discovered the wound made by the arrow, and broke into wrathful ejaculations. One man was sent off to find some particular leaves before it grew dark, others to cut branches and creepers to make a litter, the construction of which she superintended. By this time the patient was pretty far gone, but his last conscious recollection was of the old lady's directing the men who were lifting him into the litter, and scolding all the while. After that, for an unknown period of time, he lived in dreams—vague and fearful visions in which his recent experiences combined with recollections of tales he had heard, things he had read, and stray glimpses of his present surroundings, to form a kind of kaleidoscopic hell.

There was the Chinaman, who stared at him with horrible gleaming glittering eyes, and who—horror of horrors!—had no body. Perhaps if he looked at it hard enough, the awful thing would vanish, and vanish it did, but it was apparently snatched away by some one with a yell. Thereafter he was pursued interminably through all the scenes of the Chinese insurrection, of which he had heard from his aunt, by staring Chinamen, with bodies and without. There was something hard and heavy and greasy-feeling, which *would* find itself on his forehead, however often he shook or wriggled it off. "A piece of soap," he said to himself, and even in his dreams had dreadful misgivings as to where it had come from, and what adventures it had gone through on the way. Sometimes it was the roof of the burning house falling upon him, sometimes a mass of rock, under which he was to be buried, already pressing upon his head. There was the circle of curious faces, all gazing intently upon him, at first with a veneration which was that of his friends the Thakip tribesmen, but which changed suddenly into the hatred and derision of the Mahkyoon villagers. He lived in this circle of faces. There were direful nightmares associated with evil tastes and smells—one of these, a compulsory exploration of the Cloaca Maxima at Rome, as depicted in the small wood engraving of his boyhood's *Classical Dictionary*, recurred again and again.

Afterwards he was to wonder ruefully whether it had not been just as well that he was insensible all this time, in view of his surroundings and of the food and medicines which must have been administered to him. The old women—by prescription the doctors of the tribe—were bound to consider it a rare opportunity when a perfectly helpless patient, and a Tuan, was delivered into their hands, and he rather thought they must have experimented upon him with their whole repertory of remedies and curative methods, on the chance of finding something that met the case. Certain it was that he came to his senses once in the midst of a most realistic repetition of the burning of the rest-house—except that, like Brand in his dream, he was tied down and could not get away—and found that he was being subjected to a rude kind of Turkish bath treatment—save that the remedial agent was smoke and not steam—with the object, apparently, of smoking the arrow-poison out of his system. A thing that tor-

mented him dreadfully was a kind of bogey erected at one time at the end of his bed, just where it met his fevered eyes. It was as tall as a man, but it was not a man, though it wore a waist-cloth and head-handkerchief, and to his distraught fancy it was generally Sah the Mahkyoon, or if not he, it was Brand, which was even more trying, since if not so openly hostile, his behaviour was so questionable as to keep the mind constantly on the stretch. Had Horace only known it, the effigy was a confession of failure on the part of his physicians. Finding the patient no better for all their remedies, and unable to think of any more, they had erected the figure to invite the presence of a spirit, who was expected to come down into it and inspire them in dreams with fresh ideas.

In spite of being given up by his doctors, however, Horace rewarded their efforts by pulling through, and even began at last to take an intelligent—if shuddering—interest in the food presented to him. The surroundings in which he returned to consciousness were singularly destitute of aids to convalescence. The people upon whose hospitality he had thrown himself came very low in the tribal scale as compared with the Thakip natives, or even the Mahkyoons. They were evidently fugitives of some sort, leading a life of perpetual fear. The chief had a house—though it was low and unobtrusive-looking, and artfully hidden in almost impenetrable jungle—and one or two of the more enterprising men had built themselves huts near it, but the rest of the tribe lived in wretched shelters made of a few branches and a mat or two. Such furniture and utensils as were to be seen were of the roughest and most primitive construction, and there were none of the evidences of rude wealth and a lost civilisation often found even among the most savage tribes—brass guns and kris-handles of curious workmanship, huge jars of unknown antiquity decorated with figures of dragons, golden ornaments, and *sarongs* of rich gold cloth. The usual simple industries were absent; the women wove neither cloth nor mats and made no pottery, and—most significant of all—cultivated no ground, nor were there any fruit-trees round the village. As far as Horace could discover, the tribe subsisted entirely on the wild plantains and other jungle fruits, and on the game they took in hunting—which included lizards and grubs as well as

the more orthodox beasts of the chase. Yet they had a little store—very small it must have been, as he realised when he saw it drawn upon uncomplainingly for his benefit—of rice carefully husbanded, they made salt by burning the upper parts of the *nipa* palm, and the embroidered coats of the chief's mother and the other old women were proofs of good social standing according to tribal ideas. Little by little he picked up facts for himself and pieced them together. He had every opportunity for this, since the chief's house contained only one room besides the verandah, and the middle of this room, as the place of honour, was assigned to the guest. It was cheerful, as allowing him to see the whole life of the tribe going on around him, and it afforded the tribe, as some slight recompense for their charity to a stranger, the privilege—highly appreciated and fully used—of gazing with never-failing interest at everything the stranger did or suffered. Very early in his convalescence Horace was puzzled by the knowledge shown by his hosts of the minutest details of a white man's toilet, but the mystery was solved when it came out that thirty years or more ago Sir Gilbert Berringer had spent two or three nights among them in the course of one of his journeys. Evidently the whole tribe—or as many of its members as could find standing-room and peepholes—had watched his proceedings from the verandah, and stored up recollections of them to be rehearsed afterwards with bated breath, to less fortunate folk, or exchanged with one another. There were varying streams of tradition: one class of mind had leant more to one sort of detail, another to others, and very naturally the order of events had become slightly confused in the process of transmission; but the fact remained that to the unconscious Sir Gilbert his son owed a good deal in the way of exemption from native procedure and knowledge of what Tuans liked.

In this particular Tuan lay the one hope of the tribe—so he learned when he was able to carry on a connected conversation with the chief, who sat in the doorway carving the handle of a spear while he talked. This in itself was evidence of renewed hope, for hitherto none of the tribe had had spirit enough since their misfortunes to ornament anything. His people, the Sakyans, were fugitives from Palbat, he explained. They had always

been a weak tribe, whose lands formed a kind of buffer state between the Mahkyoon country and another powerful tribe of somewhat similar reputation. Of these people, under the phonetically spelt appellation of Warribows, Horace had read much in his father's papers; but Sir Gilbert had not grasped in his hasty visit the curious informal understanding which left the weak Sakyans in what must have been an unpleasantly precarious position between their strong neighbours, and thought them composed of outcasts from both. In a sense they held the balance between the Mahkyoons and the Warribows, since any attack by either side on the other must pass through their territory, and thus they maintained their independent existence until the appearance of white men in the interior of the country. The earlier unfortunate attempts at colonising Palbat had done them no harm, stopping short at the coast, but these new adventurers, headed by one whom they called the Tuan Kaya, or "rich lord," arriving both from the sea and by way of Bandeir, had easily consolidated their hold upon the district. The Tuan Kaya had promptly concluded an alliance with the Warribows, and conciliated them in every way—even, so the chief declared, giving them firearms and instructing them in their use. He wanted land upon which to build a settlement, and the Warribows, with the utmost generosity, presented him freely with the territory of the Sakyans, whose very natural protests went unheeded. The Warribows were entrusted with the grateful task of turning out the late tenants, in the course of which they acquired by the simplest possible means all the possessions that the unfortunate people could not carry on their persons. While they still hung forlornly about the sites of their homes, seeking in vain to bring to the notice of the white men the injustice they had suffered, some one shot at the Tuan Kaya with a poisoned arrow. Of course the Warribows said it was a Sakyan; the Sakyan chief declared to Horace that it was a Warribow seeking to complete the ruin of his victims. At any rate, a great drive was organised, in which white men and Warribows alike took part, and many Sakyans were killed and their heads taken, and others captured to become the slaves of the white men—the chief was firm on both these points, which Horace indignantly questioned. The survivors fled across the

frontier into Bandeir, and had eked out a terrified existence in the jungle ever since, in deadly fear lest the Mahkyoons should discover their intrusion, and almost as much afraid lest the Bandeir white men should make common cause with their own tyrants, and thrust them back over the border. But now, the chief concluded simply, they were happy, and did not regret their misfortunes, since they were safe under the shadow of Datu Brinja's son.

This childlike confidence was very touching, but Horace felt uncomfortably that he did not in the least deserve it. Was there never to be an end of the evil consequences following on his shirking of his duty? Undoubtedly the troubles of the Sakyans were directly due to him, since he had been the means, though innocently, of turning Mr Falck's thoughts to Palbat. He recalled now Mr Tarker's adverse comments on the Palbat Company and its Director—comments which he himself had taken in such bad part that for peace' sake the subject had to be dropped between them. But Mr Tarker had been right, and he had been wrong. Injustice, oppression, forced labour, the arming of native against native—the heart of Berringer of Bandeir was hot within him at the thought of such iniquities barely a stone's-throw from his border. Somehow the wrong must be put right—if he had to buy out the Company and mortgage the revenues of Bandeir to do it. But first of all he must have a good talk with Mr Falck, and put things to him plainly. No doubt he needed only to have the state of affairs laid before him, and its causes pointed out. He was new—his nation was new—to the work of colonisation; they could not be expected to know its ins and outs by instinct. Horace would show him that his methods were not only ruinous as regarded his own Company's territory, they were dangerous to the safety and damaging to the prestige of every white man in Jhalabor. It was unfortunate in a way that Erna was no longer a link between them—rather the contrary. But after all, it was Horace who was the injured party—unless Mr Falck chose to take the most impossibly perverted view of the situation. He only hoped Mr Falck might not try to bring about a reconciliation, for he was as strongly determined as when Melifred made her unfortunate attempt that he did not desire one. In proportion to the

ecstasy of his expectations before his last interview with Erna was the revulsion of feeling that had followed. To him she would now always be like the elf-maidens of Scandinavian story—beautiful exceedingly to look upon, but hollow. No, he and Mr Falck must meet as men of affairs and treat on a business footing, and they must do it as soon as possible.

As it happened, the opportunity was to occur sooner than he expected.

CHAPTER XVI.

WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?

MR FALCK was feeling worried, for all his plans seemed to be going awry. This was not the fault of the plans, but of the people upon whom it was unfortunately necessary to depend for carrying them out. What had first given things a twist in the wrong direction was that poisoned arrow, which had brought desolation upon the Sakyans. True, thanks to Sansom's presence of mind, the arrow had missed its mark, but his partner wished a dozen times a day that Mr Sansom's prompt intervention had not been so exceedingly active. To push a man out of the line of danger was one thing, to hurl him aside with such force as seriously to injure him was quite another. But for the injury to his head, Mr Falck would himself have gone to Thakip to meet his daughter; but for the fever that supervened, he would at any rate have prevented Sansom from going, but when he recovered his senses the mischief was done. He could hardly lay to Sansom's charge the inconsiderate way in which Erna had acted—not playing her fish gently, but allowing, nay inciting, him to break the line and escape—for the mischief was done before he arrived. Nor could he imagine that he himself might have prevented it, since he could not have travelled faster than Sansom—if so fast. But he could have smoothed things over, minimised differences, worked in turn on each of the two headstrong young people until they began to gravitate towards one another again. Whereas Sansom obviously regarded the quarrel as having occurred for his special benefit, and took advantage of it accordingly. In the midst of his chagrin, Mr Falck could not

but congratulate himself on the way he had dealt with the travellers on their arrival. The very slightest encouragement, and Sansom and Erna would have declared themselves engaged, but they had no chance. With dexterous alternations of extreme cheerfulness, when he talked so much that no one else could say anything, and extreme weakness and depression, when it would have been heartless to worry him with disturbing news, Mr Falck succeeded in warding off any revelation. He kept them up until Sansom, having satisfied himself of the thoroughness with which the Warribows had hunted down the Sakyans, could be shepherded out of Palbat and back to Singapore, and with his departure, such courage as Erna possessed departed too. She exhibited every sign of depression—but she attributed them anxiously to the climate—and her father condoled with her tenderly, and in sympathetic asides to Melifred deplored the inability of affectionate parents to make up lovers' quarrels for them.

Undoubtedly Mr Falck intended to be much better than his word, and to make up the present quarrel if the strongest possible moral suasion exercised on both parties would do it, but here his plans went wrong again—this time through the precipitate action of Sansom and Brand. Quite aware that the regrettable necessity might arise of removing young Berringer from the scene, he had elaborated the ingenious plan by which the removal was to be the work of the Mahkyoons, and attributed to the ambition of Peter Tourneur. The plan was so very neat that in a moment of expansion he had been unable to refrain from confiding it to Sansom, who had seized the first opportunity of getting it carried out, whereas Mr Falck would never even have devised it, could he have foreseen the present situation. The poor man was really very badly served. What with his illness, and the difficulty of getting Sansom out of the country without allowing him to declare himself, his mind was fully occupied, and it never occurred to him that Sansom was making use of his scheme with the deliberate intention of ridding himself of his rival. The painful truth was first revealed in a letter from Brand, telling of his sudden dash to the aid of Mr Wareup—who, he was glad to say, was now mending rapidly—and of the unpleasant adventures that had marked the journey,

culminating in the disappearance of poor Bliss, who had not been seen since the morning after the fire. Whether he had tried to cross the swamp by himself, and fallen into a deep pool, or been swallowed up by the tenacious mud, would probably never be known. The Mahkyoons had been enlisted as trackers, but unfortunately a day of heavy rain had obscured the trail before they could get to work. One of them had averred that he could distinguish signs of blood, but admitted that it was merely a guess—and obviously there was no reason why any one should have attacked the poor fellow, though the Mahkyoons had certainly displayed a curious antipathy to him.

It was a masterly letter, which could have been shown anywhere without exciting the smallest suspicion, while yet it made Mr Falck aware that everything had been carried out according to plan. But the unfortunate thing was that Mr Falck had not wished the plan carried out, and in the seclusion of his own mind he applied to his over-zealous agent a number of resounding and full-blooded German appellations. And if anything could have made the blunder worse, it was the uncertainty of Horace's fate. Alive, he was to have married Erna, and practically made his father-in-law a present of Bandeir; dead, his death could be used to stir up the people against his wicked uncle; but where was the use of accusing Peter Tournour of murdering his nephew when the nephew might at any moment appear alive? Certainty—one way or the other—that was the indispensable thing, and Mr Falck wrote Brand a heart-broken letter—which cried aloud to be shown to all and sundry—deploring the sad fate of one whom he had hoped to welcome into his family. Was there really no possibility of ascertaining what had happened—no grave at which a widowed bride might weep? Brand read between the lines the urgent desire for more exact information, but Brand was determined to know, and therefore to tell, nothing more than he could help. Sah stated baldly that when he went back to find Tuan Balisi and guide him across the swamp, he was not there, and the Mahkyoon villagers—having succeeded in driving the man-stealer out of their country to die, as they contentedly believed—denied bluntly ever having seen him. It was to be feared nothing definite would ever be known, Brand wrote sorrowfully, until the jungle, like the sea, gave up its dead.

Distinctly irritated, Mr Falck wrote back urging earnestly a more thorough search, and meanwhile applied himself to turning even the uncertainty—tiresome though it was—to the advantage of his own plans.

It seemed good to him to make use of Melifred to break to Erna the news of Horace's disappearance. He told it her one evening, that she might, as he said, have the night in which to devise some means of softening the blow to the poor little bride. His big jovial voice had tears in it.

"The heart of the young maiden—what a tender flower it is!" he said brokenly. "Not even the father-hand must touch roughly so delicate a thing. To the sister-friend alone must the task fall of preparing the shrinking bud for the possible bitter blast—so?"

Melifred resisted the temptation to tell him coldly that the tender bud had a good tough stem and he knew it, and accepted the task. The night's grace was something to be thankful for—not that she might devise a means of sparing Erna's non-existent feelings, but that for a little while she herself might mourn. The time seemed interminable until Pélagie and the two *amahs* had performed all their multifarious duties and retired, and she and Erna were in bed—each in her mosquito-net tent—at opposite sides of the large room. Even then she had to wait a little longer, with swelling heart and bursting throat, to allow Erna to get safely to sleep, before she could pull the sheet over her head and allow herself to weep—freely, but silently still. Not for herself—she was conscious of no sense of personal loss—but for the young man cut off in his prime, for the duty tardily recognised and now for ever left undone, for the idyll of Sir Gilbert and Lady Berringer, prematurely faded instead of flowering anew in their son, for poor harassed Mr Tourneur and patient strong-hearted Aunt Rosamond—robbed of the natural crown of their work—for Bandeir left without a shepherd. It was characteristic of her that she attached no credence to the faint hope suggested by Mr Falck that Brand was taking too black a view; she felt not the smallest doubt that Horatio Berringer was dead, and Sir Gilbert's great experiment brought to an untimely end.

A voice startled her—raised rather loud, for her own sobs,

though sternly repressed, made her deaf to sounds from without. "I know what you are crying about!" it said.

"What do you mean?" Melifred flung back the sheet angrily and looked across the room, where Erna was dimly visible standing inside her curtains. She lifted them, scurried across the floor, and diving under Melifred's net, took a little leap which landed her neatly upon the bed, where she sat looking like a moon-maiden, with two long plaits of pale gold hair hanging down over her fluffy draperies of softest blue.

"Ugh! there might be *anything* on the floor in the dark in this horrid country!" she said, shaking the hem of her dressing-gown anxiously. "I wonder if I ran across without getting any mosquitoes on me? I hope they'll stay with you if I have, for it's your fault I came."

"I didn't ask you to." Melifred's tone was as stately as she could make it, but Erna remained unimpressed.

"Well, who do you think could get to sleep with you crying under the bedclothes—one, two, three, *choke*; one, two, three, h-h-h-h"—imitating a long gasp—"and it was no good pretending not to hear, when I knew it was because the Berringer boy is dead."

"Erna!" cried Melifred sharply, "do you remember he—was fond of you? But how did you hear?"

"Oh, your *amah* heard it from the man who brought the letter—you know how these people find out everything—and she told mine, and mine told Pélagie, and Pélagie thought it her duty to weep into my slippers when she gave them me, so I asked her why, and she told me. And now you think it your duty to weep too. He ought to be flattered. And very likely he's not dead at all."

"You have no reason to think so," said Melifred, almost inaudibly. Erna looked at her curiously.

"I believe you are in love with him, after all," she said.

"No doubt you do. It is exactly the sort of thing you would believe." Melifred's voice was weary.

"Well, but aren't you?"

"I am *not*," with tremendous emphasis. "It's so likely— isn't it?—when I have been doing my best all this time to bring him and you together again?"

"Ah, but you are so queer. That wouldn't signify a bit. You would do it because you thought I wanted him really, or because I should make him a good wife, or because Papa wanted it, and you felt it your duty to do as he wished."

"I suppose I ought to be flattered now," ironically.

"Oh, but, Milly, if you would only be sensible! It would be so awfully convenient if you were, you know."

"I thought you generally complained I was too sensible?"

"Silly! If you were in love with him, you know I mean. Because I don't want him a bit, and you can have him."

"Thanks awfully. It makes no difference, of course, that it's you he cares for?"

It would have been too much to expect Erna to confess that before the close of their last interview she had reason to think Horace's feelings towards her had changed. "Oh, that doesn't signify," she said hastily. "You can easily make him care for you instead. I'll help you. I'll be as nasty as I can to him. I'll be a perfect beast. Then you must be most utterly sweet—not always snubbing him, in a horrid sarcastic voice, as you do all the men—and very soon he'll forget that he ever thought of me. You can do it quite easily if you try."

"And I suppose it doesn't occur to you that I should despise myself if I tried, and despise him if he did forget you and—turn to me?"

"You are so hopeless!" lamented Erna. "Oh, Milly, why won't you understand? I don't want to marry him. I want to marry Alonzo, and Papa won't let me. He has always said his money gives me the right to choose, but he only means me to choose some one he likes."

Melifred was hardly listening. "Do you call Mr Sansom Alonzo?" she demanded.

"Why shouldn't I?" innocently. "It's his name—one of his names, at least. Edgar is his business name, and most people don't know that he is called Alonzo; but I asked him and he told me, and I said I should always call him by it. I think it's an utterly precious name."

"Utterly idiotic!" said Melifred impatiently. "But what I meant was, how did you get on those terms with him? I shouldn't have thought you had time——"

"Or opportunity? No, of course you wouldn't. You watched me like a lynx—Alonzo said so. But you don't think I'm going to tell you how I managed, do you? No, thank you, my dear! I may want to do it again, you see."

"But you know your father doesn't like him, Erna—and he really isn't a nice man——"

"I say he *is* a nice man," said Erna decisively. "He is much handsomer than Mr Berringer—*much* more romantic-looking. And he will live just where I like—he's sick of Singapore, he says so; and as for Jhalábor, he hates it with a hatred beyond words, *just* as I do. I loathe and detest and abhor Bandeir, and every single creature in it. I don't care a scrap about setting an example and having a good influence—I want to be comfortable, to have what I like and do what I like, and he will let me. And the other one wouldn't."

"But a life like that wouldn't make you happy," urged Melifred.

"It will—me. I'm not like you, always wanting to do something uncomfortable and horrid. I want to be let alone, and to let other people alone. And you won't see that you're simply cut out for Bandeir, and for all the things that I should hate. Oh, Milly, be sensible, do! You take Mr Berringer off my hands—off Papa's, rather—and I'll help you to marry him, if you'll help me to marry Alonzo."

"You don't understand," said Melifred, in an exhausted voice. "I—I don't want to marry him; I have never thought of it." This was strictly true. In all her dreams of the future, she had been no more than the domestic factotum of Horace and Erna, seeing that the machinery of the home ran smoothly, caring for the children—Erna would make a distractingly pretty mother, but a deplorably heedless one—accompanying Erna when she had to take them home, and looking after the whole party on the voyage; Erna would want to settle down in Europe when she got there, leaving her husband to take care of himself, she knew, but she would *make* her go out again. And now Erna overturned this castle in the air with one touch of her finger, and Melifred grew angry. "He doesn't want me, and I wouldn't have him if he did!" she declared rashly.

"Well, I think it's perfectly sickening of you!" said Erna

dolefully. "I don't want him either, but Papa will just take for granted that I am going to have him, and I shall have to. And Alonzo will go away and live like a savage on some awful island—he says so—and I shall never see him again, and always have to see *that* Horace Berringer and be utterly miserable!"

"You seem to forget that poor Mr Berringer is—dead," said Melifred, bringing out the word with difficulty.

"No such luck!" said Erna disconsolately. "If I wanted him to be alive he would be dead, or if"—with some confusion of thought—"it was Alonzo, *he* would be dead. But because he is himself and I don't want him, he is sure to be alive, and Papa will make me marry him."

"No one can make you marry him, if you don't want to," said Melifred, turning over with an air of finality, and presenting only the back of her dark head for Erna to look at. Erna contemplated it with disgusted contempt.

"Silly!" she said. "Cat!" and made her return dash across the room to her own bed, leaving Melifred's mosquito-net so disarranged that Melifred had to get up and put it right. Neither of them would condescend to recur to the subject of their mid-night conversation in the morning, but Erna went about with an injured air which Mr Falck apparently interpreted as denoting grief. At any rate, he said sorrowfully to Melifred—

"I see, Meess Milly, you haf performed your heavy task—so? Ah, how the tender bud bows before the cruel blast! Never again is sorrow quite so overwhelming as when the heart is yong."

"Mr Falck," said Melifred, with sudden determination, "you are quite mistaken about Erna. She doesn't feel this nearly as much as you think." She had not intended to speak at all. Anything she might say would be so dreadfully open to mis-construction, after what had passed last night. But Mr Falck was too exasperating. Now he looked at her with pained reproach.

"Beneath the delicate exterior of the chentlest maiden may be hidden the resolution that conceals the death-wound," he returned in his best manner—the manner she had once angered Horace Berringer by calling Pecksniffian.

"Yes, but it doesn't here—really. If you would only have a talk with Erna, and get her to tell you what she really feels!

They quarrelled, you know—and I don't believe she has ever thought of him in quite the same way since."

"My dear Meess Milly—" Mr Falck spoke sorrowfully—"is it beyond you to distinguish the innocent bravado that seeks to disguise a sorrow for which there is no remedy? Do you forget that in her desperation my poor little one even affected to feel an interest in another person in the hope of recalling her lover to his allegiance? Shall I by rude questionings drife her to affirm that interest afresh at a moment when she is not mistress of herself? If she chooses to conceal her heart from you, her sister-friend, shall I bluntly seek to force its confidences?"

Certainly Mr Falck was unequalled in appearing to believe what he wished to believe! Still hampered by Erna's only too explicit confidences, Melifred felt that she could say no more. "It really seems as if it would be happier for poor Mr Berringer to stay dead, for his own sake!" she said to herself despairingly.

But another letter came from Brand, who had by this time discovered something of his employer's real views on the subject—very ingeniously, when the nature of the correspondence between them is considered—which was distinctly more hopeful. Mr Tarker had arrived at Thakip, furious at the news of Bliss's disappearance, and determined to solve the mystery—one might almost imagine, wrote Brand significantly, that he knew something more about Bliss than most people did—and he and Mr Warcup, now restored to health, were setting on foot a fresh and most thorough search. So far the only result was the discovery of a scrap or two of white flannel with a narrow grey line in it in a thicket of thorn-bushes, but poor Bliss had been wearing shirt and trousers of that kind of stuff, and the thicket was close to one of the Mahkyoon villages, the inhabitants of which had stoutly denied seeing anything of him, so that there were certainly grounds for hope. In this Mr Falck agreed enthusiastically, and mentioned in his reply that in case the poor fellow had got bushed and wandered blindly in the Palbat direction, he was setting his native allies to scour the jungle on their side of the border. It was not necessary to add that in this humane quest they might possibly extend their search a little way into Bandeir, for Brand would so understand, and the Bandeir authorities could not possibly object.

Horace's friends the Sakyans naturally looked at the matter very differently. The news, brought in by the men who had been out hunting, that the Warribows were making a methodical search of the jungle under the command of one of the Tuan Kaya's white men, filled the ramshackle huts with lamentation and woe. The people had not enough spirit left to flee further; they had thought themselves fairly safe, and now they were being tracked to their last refuge. In vain did Horace try to inspire them with some degree of courage. He knew that just here the boundary between Bandeir and Palbat was so vague that they could not necessarily be considered safe, though well on the right side of it, but he believed he could ensure their safety if they would only listen to him and bestir themselves a little. Even if the pilgrimage over the much-dreaded uplands to Thakip was a hopeless enterprise for so weak and discouraged a remnant, there was the post guarding the old Chinese road—held, it was true, only by a Malay sub-chief and a dozen or so of his men, but indubitably in Bandeir, and therefore unassailable unless actual war was intended. That the Palbat Company should think of making war upon Bandeir, or allow their native auxiliaries to do so, was absurd, but the Sakyans were not to be cheered by any assurances of safety under the flag. Their conviction was that the Tuan Kaya and the Warribows were out for their blood, and might as well have it.

What made this resignation the more irritating was Horace's belief that it was not the Sakyans who were being sought for at all, but himself. What was more natural than that Mr Falck should take part, so far as his own dominions were concerned, in the search which meant so much to Bandeir? It was rather tiresome, since to be carried off to Palbat meant delay in accomplishing his project of going to his uncle's help as soon as possible, though if there was a doctor at Falckenheim, the longest way round might prove to be the shortest way home. But he did not want to see Erna—now or at any time—nor, to tell the truth, was he particularly anxious to meet any civilised person while he was still restricted in the matter of clothes to the remains of the shirt and trousers which had gone through all the vicissitudes of the fire and the flight, and the efforts of the old women, at his earnest request, to cleanse them. His idea had been to replenish his

wardrobe from Thakip, and he had been trying to carve a letter to Mr Tarker on a fairly flat piece of wood. He was still so weak that his hands seemed to have no power in them, and even the smallest parang he could find was a most unhandy tool, so that the intense interest and admiration of the Sakyans for this as for all his doings was exasperating rather than gratifying. It was a relief to feel that there was no need to finish this work of art, and that it might remain as an heirloom in the chief's family, though it would have made him feel safer to send it. He had a confused idea that something Brand said had suggested that Mr Falck was in some way responsible for what had happened to him, but the effort to remember exactly what it could have been was hopeless in his weak state. That Mr Falck should countenance arson and attempted murder was absurd, of course, but it was just possible he might resent Horace's declining to humour Erna in her dislike of Bandeir. There might be something of that kind in the air, though of course it could involve nothing more than a cooling of the old friendly intercourse, but it would have been extremely convenient if old Tarker could have been told where to find his lost assistant. Horace gave up the idea with a sigh, and asked for the chief, who came gloomily from the doleful circle of his advisers.

"Tuan!" he said lugubriously.

"Don't be so miserable, chief. I have thought what to do. The Warribows are seeking me, not you."

"Is it so, Tuan? Then many of them, and all the Sakyans that are left, will die before they seize you."

"No one is going to die. Trust me, you shall be left in peace if you do as I tell you. What has happened is that the Tuan Kaya has heard somehow that there is a sick white man in the jungle, and he desires to find him and help him. So you must carry me out a long way from the village, and leave me where the Warribows and their Tuan will find me, and no one will know anything about you."

"But is it certain the Warribows won't kill you, Tuan?" The chief's voice was not very hopeful.

"Quite certain. Why should they? The Tuan Kaya would punish them if they did. He will show me kindness, and I will come and see you on my way back to Thakip."

The chief pondered the matter. He felt deeply the honour of being the host of Datu Brinja's son, but very naturally the safety of the remains of his tribe bulked even more largely in his view. Having no intercourse with the Bandeir tribesmen, he did not know of the dangers—real and imaginary—threatening his guest, and it seemed reasonable to believe that one Tuan would not injure another. He rose.

"It is well, Tuan," he said. "We will consult the spirits—that is, I will tell the elders, and see what—that is, whether they consider your plan safe for yourself."

A light broke upon Horace. "Chief," he said, "you have got a head hidden somewhere."

"Only one, Tuan—only one. That was all we could save. But the spirits belonging to it are most powerful."

"It is a Chinaman's head—I know. And you brought it near me—me, though you knew what were Datu Brinja's commands about heads—when you thought I shouldn't know what it was. It has cowrie-shells or something bright for eyes."

The chief looked conscience-stricken. "True, Tuan, but your spirits told you what it was, and I took it away at once. Be at peace, Tuan; we know your spirits are the stronger, and therefore we will obey you, and not consult ours."

But Horace was almost driven to wish they had consulted theirs, if it would have prevented his being waked over and over again that night by anxious souls bent on ascertaining whether he was quite sure he would be safe if they allowed him to leave the protection of the tribe.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STATE PRISONER.

SINCE the tribe were forbidden to consult their oracle, they were not visited by any dreams that could reasonably be interpreted as opposing Horace's plan, and very early in the morning they began, with much reluctance, to carry it out. Nothing but his absolute command could have prevented his first friend, the chief's mother, from goading the tribe into retaining their guest, at whatever risk to themselves. But even she did not venture to set up her authority against his, or to blame him, though she made up for this by scolding impartially every one else concerned. At the last, when he had bidden farewell to the village, and was being carried into the jungle on a rough litter, she ran after him, and thrust something into the breast-pocket of his tattered shirt:

"It is for you, Tuan," she panted; "but you must never let the Tuan Kaya or any of his men see it."

"All right; I promise," Horace assured her, and she rubbed his hand once more over her face and hobbled back, the skirts of her long cumbrous coat flapping about her bony knees. The thing she had thrust into his pocket was hard and heavy, and felt greasy when he lifted his hand to touch it.

"That bit of soap!" he said to himself, recognising the shape which had grown familiar to him as it pressed on his brow. But now he found that it was not soap but a stone, with nothing more remarkable about it than the soapy feeling.

"A piece of soapstone, I suppose," he said to himself. "But it won't do for old Anu to be giving away the talisman of the tribe." He beckoned to the chief, and showed him the gift

forced upon him. The chief looked at it respectfully, but declined to take it back.

"Doubtless she was advised in dreams to give it to you, Tuan, that you might always remember the hope of the Sakyans was bound up in you. But the Tuan Kaya must never see it, or guess that you have it, or it will mean the destruction of those of us who are left."

"Very well; he shan't—even if I have to put it in my mouth to hide it. But I hope it won't come to that"—Horace thought to himself as he put it back in his pocket—"for even if I could get it in, it would be a regular gag," and he dismissed it from his mind.

There was more than enough to occupy his thoughts in the nature of his progress, for the Sakyans had not ventured to invite the attention of possible enemies to their village by constructing a *batang*, and the paths by which they found their way through the jungle were rather like the course of an obstacle race—with mud, fallen trees, projecting branches, and thorny creepers for the obstacles. Only those familiar with these perils could keep their footing among them—much more carry a heavy load—and if Horace never came actually to the ground, he had every expectation of doing so over and over again, while his hands were perpetually occupied in warding off the prickly ropes which swept across his face. He was quite exhausted by the time the worst part of the transit came to an end, and it was with much relief that he felt his bearers at length lowering him gently to the earth. They had reached a small river which he knew, from his recollections of Mr Tarker's maps, to lie well within Bandeir territory, and he had agreed with the chief that this would be the best place for him to await the searchers. The Sakyans found a fairly dry piece of ground, and propped him up there with his back against a tree, and a parang at his side in case a wild pig of warlike instincts should intrude upon him. They wanted to remain in hiding close at hand to see what happened, but he sent them off, since he had no hope of turning back the Warribows if they found themselves actually in the neighbourhood of their natural prey. They might come again in the evening and see what had happened, he told them, so as to take him back to the village if he had not been found by their

foes. Slowly and reluctantly they went away, and Horace sank into a sleep which was half a stupor of exhaustion. How many hours elapsed he could not have told, but the sun, which had been on his right hand, was well over towards the left when he awoke under the concentrated gaze of many eyes. All round him stood a throng of tribesmen, in full war array, and at their head a white—or partly white—man of indeterminate nationality. He uttered an exclamation when Horace opened his eyes, and swinging off his helmet, bowed ceremoniously.

"The missing Mr Bliss!" he cried in careful English. "My dear sir, how I congratulate myself to have found you!"

"Awfully good of you!" murmured Horace, still staring at him bewildered. Then recollection returned to him, and he recovered himself a little. "I've been in the jungle ever so long, sick," he explained. "Some natives found me and looked after me. This morning they dumped me down here and left me—at least I suppose it was this morning."

The other followed his words with the strained attention of one who is fearful of missing his way in a strange tongue. "Oll right!" he said reassuringly. "We take you to Falckenheim, give you good care—every attention—so?"

"Thanks awfully. I say, call your tribesmen to heel, will you? This is Bandeir, and I don't want you to get into trouble, as you have been kind enough to rescue me." The native warriors had apparently discovered some trace of the Sakyans, and were questing like hounds.

"Oh, this is Bandeir?" with a curious look, but the rescuer called to his allies, and they obeyed with some reluctance and evident disappointment.

"Yes," replied Horace heartily. "I know the boundary is rather doubtful about here, but you see, my chief at Thakip has gone into the matter thoroughly, and I have seen his maps, so I know."

Again the other looked at him as though he suspected him of meaning more than he said, and Horace guessed that he had instructions to see how far he could penetrate into Bandeir without opposition. Apparently, however, the warning he had received was sufficient, and he chose out four of his men as bearers, and told them to lift Horace carefully, then led the way in the

direction opposite to that of the Sakyan village. From time to time he turned back to say a few words, as though he needed time and thought to compose his English sentences, and in this way Horace learned that his name was Tasman, that he was one of a dozen or so "white" men in the employ of the Palbat Company, and that he had come so far from the Falckenheim settlement on his errand of mercy that it would be necessary to camp in the jungle for one night. This was rather a relief, since the farther Falckenheim proved to lie from the Bandeir border, the safer the Sakyans were likely to be; but Horace was disappointed of his hopes of getting a wash and a change of clothes when at length the camp was pitched. Mr Tasman travelled light, it appeared—at any rate in respect of toilet articles; he was well provided in the matter of food and bedding—and as he observed with devastating common-sense, what was the good of a clean face in the jungle, where there was no one to see you, when you would reach the settlement to-morrow morning, and could wash as much as you pleased, if your tastes happened to lie in that direction? He was really a kind little man, and pressed all his highly seasoned dainties upon Horace, who ate what he could for fear of hurting his feelings by refusing, and endured dreadful nightmares in consequence. The Warribows, sitting round their fire, bore a disquieting likeness to the Mahkyoons, and he remembered finding recorded in his father's papers a tradition that the two tribes sprang originally from a common stock, but that one branch had been cast off by the other owing to some moral delinquency. Which tribe had been the delinquent, and which had done the casting-off, was naturally a point on which the legends of the Mahkyoons and of the Warribows were diametrically opposed. But in dress—or rather decoration—and in weapons, the resemblance was so close that Horace spent the night in a confused whirl of poisoned arrows, spears, silent men, and jeering women and children.

It was evidently a dislike to night-travelling rather than the actual distance to be covered that had made it necessary to encamp, for when the march was resumed with the first streaks of dawn, it seemed to Horace, who had fallen again into an uneasy doze, that he had only been lurching and swaying a minute or two on the shoulders of his bearers before they came

to a dead stop with a suddenness that woke him effectually, to find his feet considerably higher than his head. They were on the side of a hill, that was clear, and Mr Falck's genial countenance was beaming benevolently down on him, and Mr Falck's cheerful voice, subdued to a decently sympathetic pitch, was greeting him with eager enquiries.

"You haf been seeek—so? My poor yong friend, how must you haf suffered! But you are come to the right place—as you say, so?—where the misfortunes of the past shall but enhance the happiness of the present. Welcome, a thousand times welcome, to Falckenheim, my dear Bliss!"

He was so warm, so hearty in his greeting, that Horace's weakness very nearly disgraced his manhood by actual tears. He wrung Mr Falck's hand feebly and stammered his thanks, assuring him incoherently that he was much better—was sorry to be a bother—would be all right in no time, and so on. But what really pulled him together was an intrusive recollection which asserted itself suddenly. He remembered all at once what Brand had said when he waked him hastily in the burning rest-house—"It was Falck put me up to it!" Up to what? to something that wore a guise very nearly resembling attempted murder? The idea was grotesque—could only spring from the weakness due to his illness—especially at a moment when Mr Falck was displaying additional anxiety for his comfort. He was bidding the tribesmen cut some shady branches, and dispose them over the litter so as to shelter its passenger from the sun's rays.

"For we haf a long climb before us, and I perceife you are in no state to bear more," he said kindly. "But courache! you shall soon be placed in comfort, and I myself will rechoice with the news of your safety the chentle hearts which haf mourned you as dead. At present—till you are restored to something of your ordinary aspect—it will be wise to spare their delicate susceptibilities."

"I suppose I do look a precious sight!" said Horace dolefully to himself as the climb was resumed. He could have wished that the branches so thoughtfully placed to shade him from the sun had not also prevented him absolutely from seeing anything. There must be a waterfall somewhere, he guessed—for the noise

became so loud that Mr Falck had perforce to abandon the attempt to talk above it—and that the path must be winding as well as steep he knew by the way in which his bearers twisted about and tilted him up and down. But whether the hillside was bare or jungle-covered, whether it looked over open country or a chaos of other hills, he had no idea, and even when the bearers stopped suddenly, and Mr Falck lifted off a large-leaved bough that lay directly across his face, walls of solid rock on either hand still prevented any view. Apparently the delicate susceptibilities to be spared were Erna's alone, for it was Melifred Corvin, very white of face, who stood looking down at the litter and its occupant. Behind her were her Chinese maid, laden with towels and bathing-dress, and an old Indian peon.

"Oh!" said Melifred, impolitely but very naturally. Mr Falck had said something as he moved the branch, but it had not in the least prepared her to see Horace Berringer's eyes looking up at her under a tangle of hair. For some reason he felt absurdly hurt.

"I knew I must be an awful object!" he said bitterly.

Melifred recovered herself and spoke quickly—perhaps because she was conscious of a queer feeling in her throat. "Oh no, not a bit!" she assured him. "How nice to see you again! We were so sorry to hear you were"—this sounded slightly inadequate, and she altered it hastily—"so glad to know you are alive. Oh no, you are not an object—only rather like a Skye terrier, you know."

"I thought you were going to say an orang-utan," said Horace grimly. "I'm sure I feel like one."

"How do you know what they feel like?" demanded Melifred, rattling on recklessly. "I felt like a mermaid just now, when I was bathing. Erna was too lazy to get up, but there's the loveliest bathing-place, a sort of natural swimming-bath—a pool in the rocks close to the waterfall, where the spray actually comes down on you as the water thunders past, but you are quite safe. I should like to live in that pool on hot days."

Horace was hardly listening. Mr Falck's attention was diverted for the moment by some question from Tasman, and he saw a chance of obeying the stringent directions he had received

about the Sakyan talisman, the disposal of which had been worrying him whenever he felt the pressure of its rough hard surface. Why he felt that it would be safe with Melifred, that she was different from those among whom she lived, he could not have put into words. The old Indian, whose duty it was, armed with a thick stick, to guard the path leading to the swimming-pool when the ladies were using it, would have told him they were caste-fellows.

"I say!" hastily, "take care of this for me, will you? and don't let anybody see it. Fearfully precious—tribe kind to me. Oh, I really am not fit to shake hands!" raising his voice as he thrust the stone upon Melifred. With a sort of pride he saw that she understood at once. In the twinkling of an eye the talisman was in her pocket.

"No, I really don't think you are," she said, looking at her hand. "Will the grime ever come off?"

"With soap and water, I trust"—Horace was laughing foolishly in his relief—"oceans of soap and mountains of water."

"I am afraid you are delirious," said Melifred gravely, but with a twinkle in her eye. "But perhaps the soap and water will cure that too."

Mr Falck was not gifted with intuition in the matter of jokes. "So?" he exclaimed in surprise as he turned again to the two. "But how should soap and water minister to a mind diseased? Ah, I see you choke, Meess Milly!" Melifred very nearly did so. "And now you shall haf the choy of breaking to the sister-friend the goot news, as a short time ago you broke to her the bad. Leafe her no longer in sorrow, I beg."

This was a fairly plain hint, and Melifred took it. "I will hurry on, and tell her at once," she said, and with a nod to Horace, went on up the pathway, the considerate Mr Falck at once restoring the shady boughs to their position. She did not trouble herself to devise any means of breaking the news, since the unwelcome fact would be all-sufficient.

"Erna, your father thinks you will be glad to know that Mr Berringer is being brought here. He has been very ill, but is getting better," she said bluntly, looking in at Erna as she lay half asleep on a couch, with her fan slipping from her fingers.

Poor Erna passed a good deal of her time in this desolate spot in semi-slumber.

"What did I tell you?" she demanded, opening her eyes wearily. "If it had been Alonzo, now—! But it's all your fault."

"My fault that Mr Berringer is alive?"

"Silly! Your fault that papa should send me that message, of course. If you had only made him understand that it was you who cared about Mr Berringer, he wouldn't have minded much while he thought he was dead, and he would be quite accustomed to the idea by now."

"But I don't care for Mr Berringer," was all Melifred could think of to say. Erna showed a kind of cynical resignation sometimes in sizing up a situation and accepting its consequences, which her companion inwardly ascribed to descent from a long line of ancestresses condemned to submit to the commands and whims of their men-folk while fully aware of their futility.

"I didn't say care *for* him; I said care *about* him—whether he is alive or dead, which you'll hardly deny that you do, and I don't," said Erna, yawning.

But when the next day Mr Falck came beaming in, to announce joyfully that the invalid might receive a visit of one minute's duration, provided no conversation was attempted, she rose at once, with a glance towards the nearest mirror, and a sigh. The sigh was to the memory of Mr Sansom, the glance mirror-wards a recognition of what was due to Horace. "After all, he is *some one*!" she said regretfully to Melifred, and Melifred, stifling a little throb of pain somewhere near her heart, acquiesced in the obvious deduction. Horace wanted Erna, Erna was content, as things were, to take Horace; her part, therefore, was as before, to help to bring them together.

The first visit to Horace's sickroom was supervised and strictly regulated by Mr Falck, who was determined that the patient should not be agitated by too much talking. A stout and bearded Cupid, he ushered in his daughter with the cheery introduction, "Here is one who has longed to see you, and whom you will rechoice to see!" and Erna, duly provided on the verandah with a bouquet, laid her flowers on the coverlid,

and murmured something conventional about being so sorry Mr Bliss had been ill, and hoping he would soon be better. There was not a trace of the independent young lady with a very decided mind of her own who had revealed herself so unexpectedly among the roses at Thakip, and Horace might have been excused for imagining that interview and all that had followed it to be a bad dream. But he did nothing of the kind. To say he was not glad to see her would have been brutal, to suggest a doubt as to her pleasure in seeing him rude, but he looked resolutely beyond her, and included Melifred pointedly in his "Awfully kind of you to come and see me!" More he had no chance of saying, for he had suffered a good deal at the hands of a German doctor who was doubtless skilful, but certainly not gentle-handed, and two energetic Chinese "boys," since reaching Falckenheim, and though his aspect was once more civilised, he looked all eyes—as Erna remarked resentfully to Melifred when Mr Falck had, with boisterous benevolence, turned them out of the room. She did not see why she should have to go and see him, when he looked so dreadful, and did not even pretend to be pleased—but her resentment was expressed to Melifred alone.

Two or three visits of the same kind followed, and then either Horace took a decided turn for the better, or Mr Falck—good simple soul!—felt that he had established things on the basis he desired. Or perhaps it was that he felt it desirable to hurry matters a little, since it was hardly possible to keep Horace's presence at Falckenheim concealed very long from the friends who were searching for him, though the news had been unaccountably forgotten in writing to Brand. At any rate, the patient was allowed to be carried out into the verandah, and Mr Falck informed Erna and Melifred joyously that they might go and sit with him and talk as much as they liked—the poor fellow needed cheering and something pleasant to think of. Instantly the ruling passion awoke again in Erna, and she spent as much time in choosing a gown, changing it for another, and changing back again into the first, as if she had been going to a ball. Melifred's advice was alternately required and scouted, for that midnight interview, though of her own seeking, rankled in Erna's mind. "How am I to know

you are not plotting to get him after all?" she demanded, unreasonably enough, then added, with equal inconsequence—"though I'm sure you're welcome to him for all I care!"

Melifred was getting decidedly tired of it. That Erna's temper should suffer in her present isolation was natural enough, but she seemed to be casting off the restraints of civilisation. And her companion could not throw up her situation and depart, nor—in the circumstances—even complain to Mr Falck. Happily either Melifred's stony silence or her own bewitching appearance restored Erna's equanimity, and she vouchsafed what she doubtless considered an ample apology.

"I didn't mean to say that—I was cross for the moment. And you must see it's your fault that things are so bothering."

Having thus made everything right, she swam into Horace's ken armed for conquest, smiling, blushing, as obviously conscious of every good point as a peacock, or the Santa Barbara of the Sistine Madonna. Melifred, following with the unobtrusiveness expected of her, realised that Erna had changed—or was it merely that she had developed? Once she had been as charmingly unaware of her charms as the kitten she resembled, but she had been learning gradually to bring them into play, and now she was ready to—? "trade upon them" was the phrase that came into Melifred's mind, for which she hastily substituted "make use of them." Engrossed in her discovery, she did not at first perceive that Horace also had changed. When he looked up smilingly on Erna's sprightly announcement of herself, and welcomed her as "a sunshine in a shady place," it sounded a most proper and natural thing to say, but Erna knew better. The old Horace would have gazed adoringly, and been unable to utter a word. Therefore Erna pouted as she sat down, and conversation languished until Melifred came to the rescue by inquiring whether Mr Bliss could really have been wounded by a poisoned arrow, as they had heard at first.

"What a thing to ask!" cried Erna, recovering herself at once. "You have such a horrid mind, Milly! Don't answer her, Mr Bliss."

"Why not, if Miss Corvin is interested?" he asked easily. "Yes, it certainly was poisoned, for I had it in my hand, and

the poison was fresh. But then I had special advantages, you see, for the tribe who took care of me declare that they cured me, and your doctor here says I cured myself by walking on and on all day in the heat. So I was cured twice over."

"And you have actually lived among the natives all this time?" asked Melifred, with a shudder.

"Oh, don't talk of it!" cried Erna. "It's horrid to think about! Even this awful place must seem nice after it."

"This place awful?" he said, smiling. "It's a perfect palace." He looked round at the wide shady verandah, with the large cool room opening from it, and wondered once more how Mr Falck had contrived to house himself so solidly in such a short time. Much of the long low building which crowned the crest of the hill was constructed native-fashion, it is true, but the rest had boarded walls and a shingled roof like Government House at Bandeir, and the floors were of polished wood instead of matting supported on joists. The furniture was obviously imported—which suggested abundant wealth just as the character of the building told of an abundant supply of labour, and Horace was not surprised that the tribes should call Mr Falck the Rich Lord. But Erna would have none of his admiration.

"A palace!" she exclaimed vehemently. "A palace made of sticks and straws, and stuck on the top of a mountain on a desert island. We might just as well be in a convent—nothing to do, nothing to see, nobody to talk to!"

"Mayn't I be of some use for once in my life?" asked Horace.

"Not if you are going to talk about palaces. Why, I thought Bandeir was bad enough, but Bandeir was Paradise compared with this place." Into the mind of both her hearers came the thought that possibly this was the very conclusion which Mr Falck had wished her to reach. "At least there were people there."

"But you don't mean to say that you really live up here alone—you and your father and Miss Corvin, I mean? Why, there's the doctor, and the chap who found me—Tasman."

"Oh, there are more—quite a dozen, I should say. But we see *nothing* of them." Excitement as usual lent emphasis

to Erna's words. "They live lower down the hill, and don't even *dine* with us. Some of them I haven't even *spoken* to!"

"Hard luck for the poor chaps!" said Horace sympathetically—with the thought at the back of his mind that Mr Falck was taking no risks. Had Sansom ventured to carry further the flirtation that had been evident at Thakip? "But I say, it's like the solar system, or Saturn and his rings, or something, isn't it—you on the top of the hill, and a circle of valiant protectors round you lower down, to see that no harm comes near you?"

"Oh, but there's another circle outside that—those horrible cannibal-looking natives live at the foot of the hill."

"The Warribows, I suppose. The whole tribe?"

"Oh no—a sort of regiment of them. But you can't exactly call them soldiers, can you, Milly?"

"Not disciplined soldiers, certainly. But they are being trained, and some of them have muskets," said Melifred slowly. The Bandeir and Palbat ideals were so different that she felt almost as if she was betraying Palbat secrets to an enemy—yet Horace must be warned of what awaited him if he should try to escape.

"Sort of native auxiliaries, I suppose. Rather a nuisance to have them so close at hand, isn't it—if you ever wanted a walk in the woods, I mean?"

"Oh, horrid!" cried Erna, regardless of the fact that in no circumstances would she ever care to take a walk in any Jhalabor wood. "We are cooped up here just like prisoners. We can't stir a step outside, and there's nothing to do inside."

"Oh, Erna, our lovely pool!" cried Melifred. "We can bathe as much as we like."

"*Bathe!*" with supreme disdain.

"And the garden—when we get our terraced lawns and thickets of roses as we are planning them."

"*You* are, you mean."

"And we can send to Singapore for anything we want, you know—books, or fancy work, or music."

"Books! Really, Milly!"

"Well, clothes, then," in desperation.

"Clothes? yes, I should think so! And do you know—" turning with extreme solemnity to Horace, "when I tried on a lovely new frock the other day, Pélagie wept—actually shed tears—because there was no one to see it. What do you think of that?"

"It sounds rather desperate, certainly."

"*Rather?* It is too utterly quite desperate, and nobody cares!"

"Oh, Erna!" remonstrated Melifred, "it really is only for a time, you know, and your father does everything he can to make us happy. Mr Falck asked us to be content to live here for a little," she explained to Horace, "because he could not leave the place till it was more established, and we said we would."

"*You* did," said Erna emphatically again. "I told you I would do anything in the world to get away. Well, at any rate we were not asked to live on Mr Bliss's verandah, and he will think we are going to if we stay much longer. So we had better come."

Horace's polite protestations did not apparently bear the ring of truth to her ears, for she swept Melifred away, leaving the invalid to wonder inevitably, but with great discomfort, whether he had been delicately given to understand that a place of repentance was open to him if he cared to occupy it. The mere suspicion was enough to determine him to make it clear that he had no desires of the sort, and when Mr Falck came to see him at night he begged for writing materials the next day.

"I want to see if I can write a letter," he said. "I really ought to let my chief know where I am."

"But I have already sent word of your safety," said Mr Falck, with mild reproach. "Are you so determined to quit us at the earliest possible moment?" He omitted to say that he had unfortunately addressed his letter to Mr Tarker at Mr Warcup's, whereas it was tolerably certain that by this time he was either back at Thakip or on his way thither.

"Oh no, of course not," uncomfortably. "But I should like to let him know—he has been awfully good to me."

"Could he desire more than to know you were with such old friends—such near friends?" asked Mr Falek.

"No, of course not," again. "But I ought to be getting back—always such a lot to do."

"You are quite unfit to mofe at present, my goot friend. The yong ladies will keep you their prisoner for some time yet. And for my own part"—in a burst of fatherly benevolence—"I trust you will not leafe us until your former happy relations with my family are fully and completely restored."

He beamed and went out, leaving Horace damp with apprehension. Whatever Erna's intentions might be, there could be no doubt of her father's.

"Is it an ultimatum?" he said to himself. "Oh, that's nonsense, of course. He couldn't make us be engaged when we don't want to—and we don't. But I suppose he might keep me here for a time—till I pretended to, perhaps."

CHAPTER XVIII.

DIVERGENT INTERESTS.

HORACE's mind did not grow easier as the days went by. No word came from any of his friends, and it was impossible not to wonder whether the news of his safety had ever reached them. The letters must have miscarried, said Mr Falck and Tasman and the doctor when he appealed to them; there was much unrest among the tribes, and obviously their first thought would be to cut the white men's communications. All that Horace could do was to dictate a letter to his aunt, to be sent down to the coast, and thence to Bandeir by sea, but even this route lay too much through Mr Falck's territory to satisfy him. Against his will, he had been driven to the conclusion that the acquirement of Palbat was merely a means to an end. But what end? There was no pretence at present of starting the plantations of which so much had been said—because, admitted Mr Falck when questioned, the Company's botanical adviser was still conducting researches into the varieties of plants best suited to the soil. The country had always been considered singularly destitute of minerals of any value, and being cut off by high hills from the happy hunting-grounds of the interior, it had no prospect even of a trade—however temporary and diminishing—in skins and ivory. Yet Mr Falck had created for himself a palace-fortress which—with all the economy attendant on forced labour—must represent an expenditure of thousands of pounds. He had a white staff amply sufficient to rule his territory if suitably distributed, but he kept it massed under his own eye. Its members all seemed to be well occupied—at any rate Horace

caught glimpses of them, when he was able to totter to the edge of the terrace outside his room, going out and coming in, sometimes walking, sometimes on buffalo-back, across the one stretch of open ground included in his view. But where they went, and what they did there, remained a mystery. Mr Falck beamed when he spoke of them. They were fine fellows, he said, splendid workers; they would be as much honoured in the future as they were beloved now. Presumably he knew best, but Horace did not take to the one or two of them who dropped in with Tasman at different times. Most of them were of like indeterminate nationality with Tasman himself, and others Germans—very worthy, no doubt, but painfully uninteresting, and showing no trace of that extraordinary sympathy with the natives which, according to their employer, exuded from their every pore. So little could be gathered from their conversation as to the methods of government in vogue in Palbat, that Horace half suspected a conspiracy of silence to keep him uninformed, but his intimacy with the Sakyans had given him a certain amount of outside information which was supplemented in various incidental ways. It came back to him, for instance, that some of the Warribows who had brought him in carried at their girdles newly-severed human heads, one of which, at least, was that of a woman. Tasman, taxed with the fact on one of his visits, admitted it at once, but pointed out virtuously that the privilege of taking heads was confined to the Warribows alone, as allies of the ruling power. Any other tribe presuming in this respect would be severely punished. Mr Falck, on the other hand, deplored the fearful pressure of business consequent on the foundation and organisation of a new state, which had hitherto prevented him from devoting his attention to the forcible reform of tribal customs. When he had leisure, and certain troublesome districts had been reduced to submission, a code of laws would be introduced, and enforced in draconic style, which would make Palbat an earthly paradise so far as its native inhabitants were concerned.

"And after all, my goot friend," he concluded, with his most genial smile, "you in Bandeir haf not yet succeeded in stamping out the practice after forty years. I hear sad

tales of the prevalence of murder and head-hunting in your outlying districts. The old must haf patience with the yong—so?”

Horace did not like the reference to Bandeir. Nor did he like the menace of a large and warlike tribe, armed and commanded by Europeans, at this point on the Bandeir border. What was the object of maintaining such a force in a country like Palbat, threatened by no one, even coveted by no one? Mr Falck could hardly intend to invade the Dutch territories which hemmed him in on the other sides, since that would bring down on him not merely Holland, but England, which had long ago practically guaranteed the Dutch East Indian possessions. But Bandeir was in the position of the “pauper that nobody owns,” and might be conquered, annexed, and exploited without much concern to any great Power, provided the transaction was effected decently and without undue noise. No doubt Mr Falck would prefer to gain his presumed end by peaceful means—and at this point in his meditations there rose before Horace’s alarmed eyes the vision of a blushing Erna led in by a benevolent parent with the words, “Take her, my goot friend, and be happy!” He was quite certain that he did not want to take Erna, and that if he did, neither she nor he would be happy, but the prospect of having to explain this to a father overflowing with beneficence and generosity made his blood run cold.

It made things worse that he was afraid Erna would give him no help. Not that he believed her feelings had changed since the evening she had expounded them so freely at Thakip, but that she seemed prepared to subordinate them either to her father’s wishes, or to her own determination to escape from Falckenheim. Her daily visits to cheer the invalid undoubtedly bored her. There was nothing to talk about, as she said, for the things that interested Horace did not interest her, and the topics that interested her were not to be found in the wilderness. Yet she came—eager, apparently, for flattery, if nothing more, and Horace showed his gratitude for the attention by delivering with the best grace he could the most outrageous compliment he had been able to manufacture in the interval. His adulation was so palpably exces-

sive that he trusted it shed an air of insincerity and artificiality over the whole interview, and it was satisfactory to note that Melifred, who always remained on the outskirts of the scene, ready to fade away tactfully if the need arose, never found occasion to efface herself. If she ever did, felt Horace desperately, he would call for help. But then there was always the menace of Mr Falck in the background, ready to fling himself into the midst of a situation even as difficult as this, and by sheer force of boisterous *bonhomie*, snatch victory from defeat. And victory for Mr Falck would mean, Horace knew it now, destruction for Bandeir—Bandeir from the Berringer point of view, that is,—its transformation from a territory run for the sole benefit of its inhabitants, and as far as possible in accordance with their ideas, into one in which the guiding principle was the right of the capitalist to the largest available return on the money he was prepared quite honestly to invest in it. Whether Mr Falck gained his point by force of arms—if he was really prepared to go so far—or, which would doubtless be much more congenial to him, by bringing family pressure to bear on a recalcitrant son-in-law, there would be an end of the old Bandeir of little industry but large liberty, of little commercial value but of equal justice for high and low.

Gradually, in the utter dearth of advisers whom he could trust, there arose in Horace a strong desire for a talk with Melifred Corvin. It surprised him to realise how his view of her had changed. At first he had regarded her merely as an adjunct to other people—a queer, rather disagreeable girl who “hung about” his aunt or Erna—but she had long since established herself in his mind as a distinct personality. She knew as much about Bandeir as he did, for one thing, and was always ready to talk about it when Erna’s conversational efforts failed, and her adoration for the memory of his parents stopped short only of idolatry. Above all, she was *straight*. She would not betray Mr Falck’s schemes—even if she was acquainted with them—but most certainly she would not let him walk blindfold into any trap Mr Falck might be laying for him. Unfortunately, there seemed no possibility of seeing her alone, for she visited him only in attendance on Erna, and the terrace was the limit of his walks, since—even had

he been strong enough to go farther—he had not been made free of the rest of the house. But one day a sudden opportunity offered itself. Erna had risen and said farewell with her usual startling rapidity—due, as she confided once to Melfred, to the conviction that in another moment she would yawn out loud—and Melfred, leaving her sentence unfinished, was hastily collecting her work to follow her.

"Oh, wait, Erna! I have dropped my crochet-cotton," she called anxiously, but Erna was yawning herself down the verandah steps, and found it impossible to turn.

"I'll go on slowly. No hurry!" she replied, between the yawns, and Melfred pursued the elusive reel through the various entanglements in which it had involved itself, Horace hanging over the edge of his couch and offering advice and encouragement. Then the thought came to him.

"Miss Corvin!" he spoke low and eagerly. "What is Falck's game? Do you know?"

Melfred, on her knees for the purpose of passing the reel round one of the legs of the couch, looked up in surprise. Then a demure little smile curved her lips. "To see you and Erna happily married, I should say," she answered.

"But she refused me absolutely at Thakip, and I accepted her decision. I haven't thought of her since. He must see it."

"Some people see only what they wish to see."

"But does he wish it? Look here, I want to tell you something awfully queer. You know Brand—Falck's agent in Bandeir?—yes, of course—I forgot. Well, I really believe—at least I do sometimes—that somehow it was Brand who tried to get me killed."

"But you told us it was a Mahkyoon who attacked you—with a poisoned arrow. Aren't you thinking of something you imagined when you were delirious? Or are you——?"

"No, I am not delirious now, I swear! It is the solemn truth that some one—of course I can't say it was Brand—had prepared the way for me by telling the Mahkyoons I was on the look-out to kidnap children and eat them. But Brand behaved in such a mad way several times that I couldn't help thinking he had something to do with it. And once—when I woke him when the house was on fire—you know, I told you—he jumped up all

shaking with fright, and called out, 'It was Falck put me up to it!'

"*Falck?* You are sure he said Falck?"

"Absolutely. Who else should he have said?"

"It just struck me that if any one was really plotting to murder you, it was more likely to be Mr Sansom."

"The partner—the dark chap?"

"Yes—because of Erna, you know."

"But I don't know. Of course I saw they were flirting—that day you spoke to me on the way to Peveril, I mean."

"Oh, it is much more than that. They would be married if they could, but Mr Falck won't hear of it."

"I see. Well, that does throw a little light. Still, why did Brand say 'Falck'? And if Mr Falck is kind enough to like me better than Sansom, why should he try to get rid of me?"

"That's what I can't make out. You don't think Mr Brand was only pretending to be asleep, to put you on the wrong scent?"

"I'm perfectly sure he wasn't. You never saw a more genuine case of fright in your life. But can you imagine old Falck capable of attempting murder?"

"Sometimes I think I know very little about Mr Falck, though I have known him so long," said Melifred gravely, winding her rescued cotton on the reel. "But nothing that I know would make me think he would do such a thing," hastily. "It's what I don't know—and wonder about."

"Well, think it over, and find some way of letting me know if you get any light on things," said Horace eagerly, and Melifred nodded as she gathered her work into its bag and went out. Erna had got no farther than the edge of the terrace—which seemed incredible in view of the tremendous revelation made to Melifred in the time—and was evidently deeply interested in something that was going on below. Looking down the steep slope to the plain, Melifred saw a man in European clothes riding a buffalo towards Falckenheim. A buffalo is not an easy mount, and he has a preference for paths of his own choosing—and in choosing them pays small regard to the convenience of his rider. The river which flowed below the hill made a considerable bend just in the field of view, and Erna knew that the buffalo, with the heroic disregard of his kind for such obstacles, was certain to

swim the stream twice rather than go round the bend, leaving his passenger the choice of falling or being washed off his back. It happened at first exactly as she foresaw—the buffalo reached the first bank and plunged in. But there was another alternative open to an experienced traveller, and the rider took it. So swiftly that the eye could scarcely follow him, he was no longer sitting but standing on the buffalo's back, and in this way was borne across without getting wet. Erna broke into a peal of gleeful laughter, and clapped her hands. The rider looked up quickly, and seeing the two girls high above him, swept off his broad soft hat and bowed low, without losing his footing as the buffalo struggled up the farther bank.

"Oh, how splendid!" cried Erna impulsively. "Did you ever see anything so cleverly done, Milly?"

"A circus-rider, I should think," said Melifred indifferently.

"That's just like you. You're going to be nasty because he bowed to me. But I don't care. He's awfully handsome, too!"

"As if you could tell at this distance!"

"Well, I can tell he is dark, anyhow. I saw his teeth when he smiled—white against his dark moustache."

"Oh, Erna—another?" sighed Melifred in despair, and Erna laughed consciously. Several times that evening she gave way to fits of musing, from which she would awake to wonder who the dark stranger was, or to wish there was some way of getting to know his name, and Melifred scolded and laughed at her in vain. The next day she lingered on the terrace on her way to Horace's verandah, but to Melifred's relief there was no one in sight. This did not discourage her, however. In the course of her visit to the invalid she became first inattentive and then frankly bored. At last she rose as suddenly as before.

"Please go on with what you are saying, and I will go and look at the view. I shall really go to sleep if I listen to you discussing the patterns of native mats any longer."

"Oh, please!" said Horace in dismay. "Let us talk about something more interesting, and not drive you away."

"There is nothing more interesting," said Erna, looking at him solemnly, and made her escape while he was still wondering whether she meant to be funny, or was again referring to the dullness of life at Falckenheim. Melifred looked after her

anxiously, but it seemed impossible even for Erna to get into mischief at the top of a high cliff, with no young men nearer than its foot, and she had something important to say to Horace, which need not take longer than the moment occupied in putting away her work—slowly.

"I have been thinking about what you told me"—she dashed into the subject point-blank—"and I really can't make it out. You are quite sure Mr Brand was not pretending?"

"If he was, I never saw any one pretend better. But why should he want to turn me against Falck? Surely that would be the very last thing Falck himself would wish?"

"It seems so, certainly. Then I suppose we must believe that Mr Falck was really—trying to murder you. It sounds so—so melodramatic, doesn't it? And then when he finds you are not murdered, he makes the best of things, and—gives you another chance?"

"That would be his idea, I suppose." Horace was beginning to lose sight of the momentous issue at stake for himself in the interest of watching Melifred's mind at work—the slow precision with which she arrived at the conclusions she launched shyly at him as though she was half ashamed of them. But she brought him back to concrete facts with a rush.

"Yes, but you don't seem to see—— It all depends on whether you take that chance or not."

"I'm afraid I am very dense, but I don't see."

"You *are* dense." She looked at him with a little sparkle of indignation. "Well, then, you said you accepted Erna's decision when she refused you. Have you changed your mind since?"

It was Horace's turn to be indignant now. "Most certainly not. How could I?"

"You needn't be so angry. It is not so very long since you were absolutely—well, there's only one word for it—gone on her."

"Not so very long? It's years! No, I suppose it isn't really"—he laughed at his own vehemence—"but it seems like it. You know how sometimes you dream you are falling over a precipice, and suddenly you are wide awake? That's how I feel. She woke me up with a vengeance. It wasn't merely that she made it clear she didn't care for me in the least—

I always felt it was so extraordinarily wonderful that she should—but the things she said about my people—about Bandeir. It was plain she and I wanted to live in different worlds.”

“And you really and truly never found that out before that evening?” said Melifred incredulously. “When I knew it, and Aunt Rosamond knew it, and every one who had ever seen you both knew it! Men are queer! But—well, then, you are not thinking of asking her again?”

“What can I say to make you believe me? Look here, it’s been the terror of my life since I was brought to this place that I might be expected to ask her again.”

“I know—Mr Falck’s manner.” Melifred laughed involuntarily. “But have you thought—if you don’t, he may ask you?”

“No,” said Horace. “He wouldn’t *ask* me.”

“What, do you mean he would give you the choice between that and—more poisoned arrows? Because that’s what I thought you didn’t see—what I have been trying to impress on you.”

“I hadn’t put it to myself so clearly, I confess.”

“That’s what it will come to, I’m afraid,” said Melifred with decision—“absurd though it sounds. Think; do any of your friends know where you are now?”

“You are the only one, as far as I know.”

She made him a little bow. “That’s not saying much, is it?”

“But you write to Bandeir—to my aunt?”

“Of course. But do letters always get safe to their destination?”

“I had an idea mine didn’t, but yours—— What makes you think so?”

“Well, I have not heard from Aunt Rosamond for a long time. Her last letter said that they were terribly anxious about you, as Mr Tarker sent word from the Mahkyoon country that you were missing, and he had gone up to look for you. It’s only natural to suppose that she would write and tell me when you were believed to be dead, but I have not had the letter. And of course I wrote to her the moment you were brought here; but has she had the letter?”

"But you would always be able to testify I had been here—if they put me out of the way, I mean."

"Don't you know them better than to think they would do things as crudely as that? To put it plainly, your uncle and aunt are not wanted here until—well, until Mr Falck's happy dream is realised. Then you will be given back to them, not only alive from the dead, but—well, Erna will be given to them too. But if you *won't* realise the dream, Mr Falck will bid you farewell more—oh, far more!—in sorrow than in anger, and you will start for Thakip. But—the Warribows use poisoned arrows as well as the Mahkyoons." She stopped abruptly, her eyes staring into the distance.

"You look as if you saw it all. I feel quite creepy."

"I do see it. You must manage to escape before the question can be raised at all."

"It would be easier if I wasn't such a log—and if Jhakibor was an easier country to get about in."

"But can't you walk? You must practise when there is nobody about, while they still think you are helpless."

"There is always somebody about." He indicated the boy, who squatted just below the edge of the verandah, apparently deeply absorbed in the contemplation of nothingness—a deceptive appearance, as Melifred knew.

"Do you know, I actually had not realised he was there!" she said, rising hurriedly. "You will have to do gymnastics under the bedclothes, or something. We must both think hard. I believe I could get you out of the place, if only you could take care of yourself afterwards. I must rush!" She hurried down the steps, drawing the worst possible deductions from the fact that Erna, displaying no signs of impatience, was looking down the hill at precisely the same spot as the day before. It hardly surprised her to catch a fleeting glimpse of a gentleman below, kissing his hand as he retired into the shelter of the bushes.

"Erna! you haven't been talking to that man we saw yesterday—or any of them? What will Mr Falck say?"

"I haven't said a single word!" protested Erna stoutly. "Why, I should have had to shout so that Papa would have heard. I suppose I may bow if any one takes off his hat to me?"

"He was doing more than that. I saw him."

"Spaniards are always rather extravagant in their gestures," said Erna, with demure triumph.

"Spaniards? You know who he is? Erna, you *have* been speaking to him!"

"His name is Narciso Alvez de Leon, and he is a Spaniard from Manila. Isn't it quite too utterly romantic?" sighed Erna, still triumphant. "No, Milly, I have not spoken to him. *You* can stay talking for ever so long to a young man, but if I just look down the hill at one you begin to spy and say nasty things."

"But how did you find out about him—unless you let down a string, and he sent you up his visiting-card? Oh, I know you won't tell me, so don't trouble yourself to make up things. If only you would behave like a responsible being, and not like a silly baby! I hate to be always spying on you, as you call it, but what am I to do when your father trusts me to look after you, and you are always trying to escape me?"

"Poor old Milly! has she the whole weight of the world on her shoulders?" scoffed Erna, and refused to say anything more, walking beside Melifred with an expression of kittenish satisfaction which filled her companion with misgiving. Poor Melifred! it certainly seemed as though she had more than her fair share of burdens; for that evening, at bedtime, Mr Falck stopped her just as she and Erna were leaving the verandah where they had all been sitting, and in his most courteous manner entreated her to give him the favour of a moment's conversation. Erna made derisive signs of compassion behind her father's back and scurried away, and Melifred returned to her chair.

"I understand you haf had some conversation with our yong guest of late, Meess Milly," said Mr Falck blandly. "May I ask whether he has taken the opportunity to make you the confidant of his tender sentiments?"

"No, indeed," Melifred assured him, her mind in a whirl. The boy had reported her talks with Horace, that was clear, and Mr Falck was suspicious. Would it do any good to repeat the assurance she had once before pressed upon him in vain, that Erna's power over her former lover was at an end, or would it be dangerous? Highly dangerous, she decided; since it might

stimulate Mr Falck to put matters to the test—which was above all things to be avoided while Horace was still too weak to escape. "He seemed chiefly anxious to hear from his friends and get back to his work," she added, hoping her moment of thought appeared less long to Mr Falck than it did to herself.

"So?" A pause. "Meess Milly, I am going to ask you an intimate question. You may hesitate to answer it, for the tender maiden-heart shrinks from the rude touch, but remember that I stand in the parent-relation towards you, and be open with me. Has Mr Berrincher offered his attentions to you?"

Astonishment and indignation combined to make Melifred's disclaimer too obviously genuine for even the most suspicious to doubt it. "Certainly not!" she cried, flushing angrily. "Why, Mr Falck, can you imagine I would have allowed such a thing, knowing what your wishes are about Erna?"

"So. I am glad to hear it. For remember," raising a significant forefinger, "in such a contingency your testimony would at once become suspect."

She was at a loss to imagine his meaning. Was he hinting that he disbelieved her account of Horace's conversation, or warning her that he had a weapon at hand that might be used to discredit her evidence in some future emergency? She answered him indignantly.

"I haven't an idea what you mean, Mr Falck. After what I have said, I fail to see what right you have to make such a suggestion."

Mr Falck beamed benevolently upon her. "I haf none, my dear Meess Milly. I was following out my own thoughts aloud—a dancherous and impolite habit. But your assurance fills me with delight, since I can now cheer the anxious heart of my yong friend Brand, to whom I am writing. Absence may increase love, but it also sows in the heart of the modest youth the fear of possible rivals."

Melifred could not mistake what was meant—preposterous though it seemed in the light of what she had been hearing about Brand. It was with difficulty that she allowed Mr Falck to reach the end of his sentence. "Please don't say that kind of thing," she said brusquely. "There is nothing of that sort between Mr Brand and me, and there never will be."

"But why do you speak as though you had heard something to the poor youth's disadvantage?" enquired Mr Falck, with grieved surprise. She scented danger in the silky tone.

"It's not that. I have never thought of him in that way, and I have no wish to," she said resolutely.

"Not if I invite you to think thus? Consider it, Meess Milly. Here is a yong man of the highest character and excellent prospects, deeply attached to you. Few things would gif me more pleasure than to associate with my Erna's marriache that of her sister-friend, and to assure the future of the one as of the other."

"Thank you. You are very kind." Melifred tried hard to be prudent and polite—in vain. "But I would as soon touch a toad as Mr Brand!" she burst out, rising from her chair in her excitement. Mr Falck patted the air with a deprecating hand.

"Chently, chently! I haf been too sudden, I see. I will encourache no rash hopes—trust me. Patience, patience—that is all I will recommend. The suitor shall not press himself where he is not desired. So sleep soundly, Meess Milly."

He wafted her, as it were, from the verandah on the wings of benediction, and she hurried after Erna—only to bump into her suddenly close to an open door. Suspicion awoke inevitably.

"Erna, you haven't been out of doors!"

"You needn't be nasty," in a depressed voice. "There was a man walking up and down on Papa's verandah, and I thought it was the Unknown."

"If you mean your Spaniard, I thought you had found out all about him?"

"I know all about him, but I don't know him." The tone was deeply melancholy. "And I crept along the verandah to look at him when he passed the light, and it was not the Unknown at all—only Mr Brand."

"Brand!" repeated Melifred incredulously.

"Yes, Brand. You needn't talk as though you had never heard the name before. I'm sure you know him well enough. Waiting to see Papa, of course. I don't know why he shouldn't have let him come and talk to us a little. He would have been better than nobody."

"But why should you think the Unknown would be waiting to see Mr Falck? To ask him for the hand of his lovely daughter?"

"Silly! just for an excuse, of course—on the chance that he might get a glimpse of me. Happily I kept out of sight, or Mr Brand might have told tales. I don't trust him."

Nor did Melifred. Brand in Falckenheim at this juncture was a dangerous factor complicating still further a situation already sufficiently involved. She was sorely perplexed. Was his appearance a mere coincidence, of which Mr Falck was ignorant, or had he deliberately lied to her when he spoke of writing to him? And in any case, what did his coming portend with regard to the man whom he had already sought to murder?

CHAPTER XIX.

GATHERING UP THE THREADS.

ALL unconscious that they had been all unconsciously betrayed, Mr Falck and Brand took counsel together on the verandah of Mr Falck's rooms, which commanded the approach to the house from the lower world—the other three sides of the roughly oblong range of buildings looking sheer down the hill. Between them was a little table well supplied with creature comforts, and their long chairs were the last word in luxury, yet neither of them seemed altogether at ease. It was not Brand's place to open the conversation—especially when he shrewdly expected it to include a wiggling for himself—and he waited with invincible respect until his employer, having smoked half through a big cigar, suddenly took it from his lips.

"It is as I feared," he said abruptly. "He does suspect you, and he has imparted his suspicions to Meess Milly."

"That's bad," agreed Brand. "Still, sir, they can only be suspicions—nothing more."

"Certainties in her mind—I could see that. Decidedly, my goot Brand, you failed to carry out that little affair with your usual address."

"I know, sir; I'm awfully sorry. It hung about so, somehow. If only one could have got it over and done with—or if it hadn't been necessary to keep oneself so absolutely out of it, it would have been no trouble at all, but it seemed to get on my nerves at last. But at any rate, sir"—with manly self-assertion—"I did think it was safely done, and so did you—and you didn't seem to like it. I gathered from your letters that I had acted too hastily."

"So I thought, at first. But now," said Mr Falck gloomily, "I could wish we had been correct in believing it was safely done."

"Bliss has always been an idiot, ever since I've known him," said Brand contemptuously. "Never did know which side his bread was buttered."

"That is most unfortunately true. I ask you"—pathetically—"what more could I haf done? The boy is obviously a fool—of the type that goes through life spending the money wiser men haf made. He is not vicious—oh no!—I can bestow my daughter upon him in the full confidence that he will make her a kind husband. He will dabble a little in art, in philanthropy, in country pursuits, and come at last to an honoured grave having done nothing—and not even aware that he has done nothing. And see! he is a fool, true—but it is the wrong kind of fool."

"The Berringer blood coming out, sir, no doubt."

"So. But I would haf made allowances for that. The blood should haf its way—within limits. But he will not accept those limits, imposed for his own sake as much as mine. He forces upon me the odious necessity of depriving him of life." Mr Falck's big voice had tears in it.

Brand was less emotional or more hard-hearted. "Of course it's all his own fault, sir," he said cheerfully; "and I only wish we had pulled it off three months ago. It would have saved a lot of trouble if old Tarker had found his body as he expected when he went prowling about. The lot of them won't be satisfied with anything else."

"Then, my goot Brand, they shall haf it, and may it gif them much pleasure! But as you say, it would be well if they had found it immediately on his disappearance. There is a suspicion of clumsiness in two accidents with poisoned arrows occurring to the same person in so short a time."

"Throw him over the cliff, drown him, tell the doctor to inject something," suggested Brand helpfully. "Then call in the Warribows and get them to preserve his head—the rest of him doesn't signify. After a week or two in a good strong smoke, who's to say that it hasn't been hanging up for months? Then one day you happen to wander into the bachelors' house

and recognise it. Awful horror and grief. Send it to Bandeir with messages of condolence. That sort of thing."

He had sufficient grace to turn a little sick as he brought out his sentences, and seizing his glass from the table, he drank it off hurriedly. But Mr Falck sat up energetically.

"That sounds so excellent, my dear Brand, that we must scrutinise it carefully for objections. Yes, that idea of the head alone—unmistakable, but affording so little scope for enquiry—is a stroke of genius. But the difficulty that confronts us is that he has been seen here by too many people. My daughter will do what she is told. You and I, I think, could contrive to silence Meess Milly. She might find herself married to you—one of my choice crew down below has once been a priest—and alone among the wildest of the Warri-bows." He pronounced it Ouaribau. "Lofe might so tame her that you need haf no further apprehension, or if not—there are fevers, and poisonous snakes—so?"

Brand nodded. His eyes were no longer expressionless. Mr Falck continued his argument with himself.

"But can we silence *eferybody*? The maids, the servants, my assistants there?" he waved a hand towards the path down the hill. "It would require a wholesale massacre—the report of which might itself attract attention to what we desire to keep hidden. Yet without it how could we ever feel safe? And there is another thing. The tribesmen who cured our yong friend of his hurt and looked after him for weeks—I cannot find them. Oh, he has been very clever, very prudent. He has never said whether it was a family, or a tribe, or a solitary individual that befriended him. But beside him when Tasman found him lay a parang, which the Ouaribau declare by the decoration of the handle to belong to the Sakyans—a vagabond tribe that infested this spot before we arrived. Chastised for their thieffish ways, they attempted to murder me, and were righteously expelled—no doubt to seek refuche in Bandeir. I haf had search made as far as it was prudent for the Ouaribau to penetrate, but they found no Sakyans, though they discovered a deserted and destroyed villache of hasty construction, which might haf been their abode. Farther they could not go, since this would haf brought them in contact with their enemies the

Mahkyoons, and I had strictly forbidden any hostile action. Now those Sakyans we cannot reach, and they would be always a dancher."

"I hope they are not a danger as it is, sir. Still, he's hardly likely to have told them who he is—— But it will be just as well to get things settled quickly. I haven't had time to tell you yet that Mrs Tourneur-Durell turned up at Warcup's just before I left to come here."

"Mrs Tourneur-Durell—in the Mahkyoon country? But why?"

"Looking for her dear nephew. Not even Tarker was doing enough to please her. Her husband couldn't be spared from Bandeir—things rather too lively there"—Brand grinned—"so she came up on her own."

Mr Falck rapped out a resounding German oath. "Brand, I am disquieted—— I haf a fear of that lady. It is she who spoiled all my plans at first, and brought Bliss out here. I don't like to hear that she is come to look for him."

"Just in time to find his body, which you have said you will willingly give her, sir," said Brand encouragingly. "One danger is out of our way, you'll be glad to hear, and that is Sah the Mahkyoon. The other Mahkyoons have put an end to him. Tarker and Warcup have been cross-questioning them, trying to find out if they had seen anything of Bliss, and I suppose the story of the kidnapping panic got out, with Sah as the authority. I don't suppose he confessed to shooting Bliss, but they seemed to think he had disgraced them in their Tuan's eyes, and so"—he described a singularly tedious and unpleasant kind of death, not open to the reproach of being actual murder.

"One dancher removed, as you say! But how do you know?"

"Why, I happened to pass the place where he was tied down one day when I was hunting. He was pretty far gone, but he called out to me—seemed to think I should beg him off. Of course I told the tribe I suspected him seriously of murdering Tuan Balisi, and even if he had not, no doubt he deserved to be killed for a dozen other things."

"That was not very prudent. He might tell them——"

"What could he tell them, sir? He had nothing to tell—unless Tarker or Warcup had got hold of him and of your Sakyans,

and put two and two together. But it's quite certain that whatever has happened to the Sakyans, no one has got hold of them yet, or Mrs Tournour-Durell would have turned up here. Probably the Mahkyoons have wiped them out, and that gives us time to dispose of Bliss neatly before his loving aunt appears. By the time she has got him decently buried, and is on her way back again, I hope there may be no Bandeir for her to get back to. Once we begin, we must rush things."

Mr Falck did not resent the imperative tone. "So?" he said mildly. "Affairs are ripe for our intervention?"

"A little over-ripe, if anything. Our reign of terror in Bandeir has been too successful; it invited imitators. And the imitators were too clumsy to keep up the mystery. They were obviously burglars and highway robbers, and as such a good many of them have been caught and punished. Old Tournour is getting the country in hand again, but there's plenty of fire under the ashes still, if we blow it up at once. But it must be at once."

"So. What would you say to an attack by the Mahkyoons on Mrs Tournour-Durell and her escort in the course of her melancholy return chourney—a *successful* attack?"

"But the Mahkyoons would never——"

"There is very little difference between the Mahkyoons and the Ouaribau. A party of Ouaribau might even masquerade as their distant kinsfolk——"

"I see, I see!" breathed Brand ecstatically. "And then you have Mahkyoons and Warribows at each other's throats at once."

"Yes. It is a regrettable necessity" — Mr Falck spoke sorrowfully—"that I must bleed—no, what is it you say?—*blood* my Ouaribau. They haf enchoyed so much sport of late in enlisting labour for me from inferior tribes, with the aid of the weapons I haf furnished them, that they need to match themselves against a more equal foe. Did I neglect to loose them against the Mahkyoons, they might even turn on me. Had our yong friend listened to the voice of expediency, I was prepared to attain my end by promoting dissensions in the tribe. The chief, Mat Ali, is inclined to presume on the kindness I haf shown him, and to believe himself indispensable.

Therefore I haf secretly encourached his brother Mat Usop in the hope of supplanting him, with the result that a promising feud is on foot which threatens to divide the tribe permanently into two fairly equal parts. These will unite for war with the Mahkyoons, but fall asunder again when peace returns."

"Ah, you know how to manage these fellows, sir! What would Bandeir say? Then I go down-country again at once, I presume, ready to see that things happen simultaneously, as they ought to happen, and don't lose their effect by coming one after the other?"

"So. You haf all your seeds sown?"

"Quite enough to do Tuan Pitah's business, I think. When the news of the fighting comes, of course he will have to take an expedition up-country. His famous river-wall will be all but finished by that time, so he will feel free to go. Then will come the news—on the day the wall is finished, if I can possibly work it—that young Berringer has been murdered by the Mahkyoons, and old Ong will disappear, leaving a confession that he was paid by Tuan Pitah to spread among the Mahkyoons the tale that brought about his death. Not many chiefs will follow Tuan Pitah then, I think."

"Ah, but will they turn against him?"

"Undoubtedly. You don't realise the feeling there is about the Berringers, sir. They will tear him to pieces."

"One must hope that the truth about our yong friend will never come out."

"Not many people will know it, and not many of those will be left when the fighting is over. You will see to that?"

"Certainly," said Mr Falck placidly. "And let us now settle what the truth is to be."

"Why, I thought you would let him leave in peace, and send a few Warribows after him to attack him on the way."

Mr Falck shook his head. "That would be to admit them into the secret, and endancher ourselves. It must happen naturally."

"Oh, if that's it, don't ask me to look after it again, sir. I can't spare the time. Besides, my nerves won't stand it. Better use more than one arrow this time, hadn't you? He may have got acclimatised to them."

This ill-timed jesting was disregarded. "He must try to escape," said Mr Falck thoughtfully. "Then the Ouaribau will naturally shoot. Should he succeed in getting through them, they will pursue, and cut him down in the dark."

"But how will you get him to escape to suit you?"

"I think," said Mr Falck sweetly, "that we might leave that to Meess Milly to arrange. If she should become aware that there is a track—rough but quite passable—down the face of the cliff from the terrace near our friend's room quite to the foot, can you imagine her so callous as not to procure a rope of some sort with which to safeguard the invalid, which she would herself hold at the top lest he should miss his footing? It might even happen that a storeroom door might be left open that day, and a suitable rope find itself in view."

"Good!" chuckled Brand. "But how can you be sure she will do it to-morrow night?—and we really ought not to delay longer. I have a horrible conviction that Mrs Tournour-Durell will turn up and demand to see Bliss. You can't very well keep her out, and suppose she decides to stay on till he's better?"

"If the goot lady should so untimely appear, it will be necessary for the patient to have a relapse, and for the doctor to forbid visitors for that day. Then he will try to climb down the cliff in his delirium, and unfortunately perish. But Meess Milly would be a difficulty."

"Let's hope your luck will hold, and give us to-morrow, sir, so that Miss Corvin may get to work to-morrow night. Shall I let her catch sight of me accidentally—if you think that would frighten her?"

"No, better not. I have a plan. She shall do our work for us—don't be afraid. And now goot night to you!"

But though Mr Falck might dismiss himself and Brand to sleep—most undeservedly—the sleep of the just, it was otherwise with poor Melifred. The problems weighing upon her mind were serious enough in any case, but the night, with its mysterious power of exaggeration, made them colossal. Hour after hour she turned and tossed upon her bed, not daring to get up and walk about the room, as she longed to do, for fear of waking Erna, who would exhibit a lively and censorious, and

possibly dangerous, interest in the causes of her unrest. Brand's presence at Falckenheim, and Mr Falck's concealment of it, had brought to a head at once all her vague fears and the perils to which they pointed. She had not a doubt that Horace Berringer's life was in grave danger—and she was the one person within the walls to whom he could look for trustworthy help. She believed she could manage to get him outside the place—whether the means she thought of were really practicable she must satisfy herself in the morning—but what was to become of him then? In a hostile country, which he did not know and his enemies did, without supplies, weak with illness, possessed of no means of transport or defence, he must surely perish of fatigue and hunger even if by a miracle he escaped the arrows of the Warribows. And yet, because there was just the barest chance that once outside he might escape, whereas inside death was certain unless he stooped to purchase life by surrender, she must get him outside if she died for it. For a moment she even considered the possibility of escaping with him. It was no thought of selfish prudence that deterred her, but the realisation that her presence could give him very little help, and might add to his danger. Feverishly she went through a list of the various servants with whom she usually came in contact, in the hope of lighting upon one to whom it would not be simple folly to open the matter confidentially, and enlist his help in getting the prisoner through the jungle into Bandeir, but she could not think of one. Mr Falck was the god of their little world, and they dreaded his wrath as much as they appreciated his good wages. Lavish bribery might have broken down their scruples, but Horace had not a farthing upon him when he reached Falckenheim, and Mr Falck was taking care of Melifred's allowance until she was once more in a place where there was anything to buy. There seemed absolutely nothing to do but to help the prisoner to make the desperate venture, and leave him to depend upon himself once he was outside. The tears forced themselves from Melifred's closed eyes as she lay with hands clenched and teeth pressed into her lower lip. She would not make a sound, but her rigid form covered the strongest agony she had ever known. Whether she held him back or sent him forth, it seemed it was for death.

The morning brought little comfort with it. Erna was in one of her most tiresome humours, and after dallying with the idea of going to bathe—on which Melifred's whole plan, such as it was, depended—made up her mind at last that it was not worth the trouble of the climb down to the swimming-pool and up again. Of course Melifred declared promptly that in that case she would go alone, but time had been wasted and every nerve rasped by Erna's maddening indecision. Her amah and old Ram Singh were waiting, and the necessity for behaving as usual, and not arousing their suspicions by any perturbation of manner, calmed her a little. They went down the straight steep path between walls of rock, which was, and was intended to be, a perfect death-trap for any attacking force, since it could be swept from above by a quick-firing gun, and from either hand by rifle-fire. At only one point was the rocky wall broken, and here a strong gate, to which Melifred had a key, led to the path down the hill to the bathing-pool. This path in itself offered no hope of escape, since the pool with its little patch of jungle was enclosed on one side by the waterfall which supplied the river below, and on the rest by inaccessible rocks, yet the idea which had come to Melifred had to do with it. Leaving old Ram Singh to guard the path, and the amah to watch over her possessions in the bathing-hut, she was soon in the water—wasting, perforce, further precious time in making it clear that she had nothing but enjoyment in view. Not that her amah was a suspicious person. All the ways of Memes were so incomprehensible that she had ceased even to be interested in them, and when her mistress called out, "I going topside, amah," it did not occur to her so much as to protest, though the rocks on the opposite side of the pool, up which Melifred was climbing, were dangerously slippery, since the perennial dew of spray from the waterfall kept them covered with a growth of moss. Melifred had never attempted the climb by herself before. She and Erna had helped one another, when she made her great discovery, and it was as much as she could do to reach the top alone. She sat there for a moment to take breath and courage, with the fall thundering down so close to her that its rainbow-tinted spray swept over her like a Scotch mist. As she luxuriated in the damp breeze, her eyes sought

the rugged banks on the other side, so clothed with ferns and creepers and orchids that not one inch of bare rock was to be seen. Somehow she had the feeling that she was watched—that somewhere in that riot of tropical vegetation was ensconced some one who was following her actions narrowly. Was it one of the Warribows, trespassing in this forbidden spot, or had Mr Falck suspected her intention and set a spy on her? In either case her plan was doomed, and the shock was so unlooked-for that a groan broke from her. Then she pulled herself together, and lying down as though sunning herself on the rock, began to scan inch by inch the opposite bank. There could not have been a better place for concealment, since the wavering curtain of spray combined with the varied colouring of flowers and leaves to make every outline uncertain; but at last she saw something move—a hand—a white hand. With a gasp she followed its movement, and arrived at a pair of eyes—a face—a woman's face. Now she was certain that what she saw was either a vision or a miracle, for the face was that of Mrs Tourneur-Durell. Had she known what Mr Falck and Brand knew, she would have been saved a bad moment, for that she should see Aunt Rosamond here in Palbat, when she knew her to be at Bandeir, made her feel she must be going mad. But the hand moved again—made signs—and she realised that if the choice lay between hallucination and miracle, a miracle it was. Restraining the impulse to spring up impetuously and dash headlong into the spray, she stood up slowly, stretching herself and yawning, walked back to the edge of the bathing-pool and waved her hand to the now somnolent amah, whose cry of protest was drowned by the roar of the fall. The woman knew what she was going to do, and having once suffered with her fellow the worst fright of their lives on seeing their two charges disappear apparently into the heart of the boiling waters, was not anxious to suffer a like anxiety again. But this time Melifred meant to do much more than fetch a fern from the damp cave under the fall, as she had done before, when Erna, hovering uncertainly at the edge, had dared her to go as far as the middle. On that occasion she had seen, so she believed, that there was possible foothold the whole way across as far as the other bank, and now she was going to prove it. And prove it

she did, appearing suddenly out of the curtain of spray on the opposite side, to the stupefaction of the watcher there.

"Melifred, my dear child!"

"Aunt Rosamond—oh, Aunt Rosamond, I couldn't be more glad to see you if you were an angel!"

"But how?—did you swim? But we mustn't waste time. Melifred, is Horace there—at Falckenheim?"

"Yes, yes—and in the most frightful danger. I was going to try to get him out to-night, and I couldn't see what he was to do, alone in the jungle and hardly able to walk—and now you are here—you, the very best person—and you will take care of him."

They were crouching close together in a hollow of the bank, sheltered by an enormous fern, and Melifred was holding Rosamond's hand in hers, and sobbing with happiness. "But you are not here alone?" she demanded anxiously.

"My dear, what a broken reed I should be! No, Mr Tarker, Horace's chief, is in command. We are hiding on an island down the river. He is making friends with the Warribows, while I crept along here, to see if it was possible to get a glimpse of you. From a distance, it looks as though there was a path up the cliff, but it was not until I got as far as this that I could be sure it ended on the other side of the waterfall. Then I saw you, and when I had made you look, I was going to talk to you in the deaf-and-dumb alphabet."

"And you never thought—— Yes, nobody knows—I found it—you can get through under the fall—that's the way Mr Berringer must escape—— Oh, Aunt Rosamond, I can't tell you how thankful I am to see you!"

"Not more than I am to meet you, dear. But now quietly—you may be missed. Is Erna over there?"

"Not bathing, no—only my amah. But I won't waste a word. I will give him the key of the gate—dinner-time will be the best time, because no one will be coming up the path to see Mr Falck just then. And you or some one will be waiting here?"

"Mr Tarker will be the best person. He shall come as soon as it is dark. But you say Horace is not very strong, Melifred. Can he cross under the fall as you can?"

"I don't know—perhaps not. I never thought of the difficulty when I saw you. But it must be quite possible, you see, for I did it. Still, perhaps some one had better be at the other side to help him over. He has been ill a long time, you know—after being wounded with a poisoned arrow."

"I didn't know, none of us knew. It has been an impenetrable mystery what had become of him. Till I met you, Melifred, I could not even be sure he was alive. And he is so terribly needed in Bandeir. I dare not take the time to tell you now, but my coming up to find him was a sort of last desperate effort. He can put things right, but no one else can."

"Oh, he will, he will!" Melifred assured her. "He is so different—so *developed*. You will hardly know him. You will feel he is the man you always hoped he would be, I am sure of it."

"Thank God for that, dear. And thank *you* for saving him for us. Now tell me, are you in any danger?"

"No, not the slightest. No one will know I have done anything, if all goes well. And if it doesn't—well, I shan't care what happens to me then—nor will any of us, shall we? We must save him—that's all that matters."

"Not at all; but if you are sure you are safe it would only complicate things for you to come away as well. Now, Melifred, think very carefully, and tell me if there is anything else I ought to know, to tell Mr Tarker. Go over the whole plan in your mind, and remember it is a matter of life and death. At least, so I gather from what you tell me."

"Oh, it is really—we are both certain of it," Melifred assured her. "Well, then, you will expect him any time after dark. He *must* cross the courtyard and come down the path cut in the rock—there is no other way. Then he lets himself through the gate, and comes down to the bathing-pool. Mr Tarker or some one will be there to help him across under the fall. Then he will be safe with you, unless— Are you sure the Warribows are to be trusted? Mr Falck has a tremendous power over them."

"Mr Tarker has a native hunter here whose mother was a Warribow, and who has been very useful in winning their

confidence. I think he fancies they are not quite as fond of Mr Falck as they used to be. At any rate, he seems confident they won't turn against us. And how does Horace get to the bathing-pool, Melifred? Can you show me the path from here?"

Melifred pushed aside the leaves, and looked searchingly across the cloud of spray. "There it is," she said, pointing. "No, that one would lead right away down the other side of the rocks beyond the bathing-pool. *There* is the right one, where you see a piece of white rock sticking out—where a large loose stone had to be pushed down to make it safe. The other is not a real path at all—it only looks like it. If only it went right up to the terrace, how splendid it would be! He would only have to step off his verandah to start, and it would take him down into the jungle without crossing the fall at all. But it's no good—the stone path is the only one that reaches the top."

"Very well, I understand. Good-bye, my dear brave girl!"

"Good-bye, Aunt Rosamond. I shall have to take care, or after shouting to you all this time I shall rouse suspicion by shouting to other people when there is no roaring waterfall to drown what one says!"

She waved her hand gaily as she dashed into the spray again, but there was more moisture on her face than was due to the waterfall when she emerged into the sight of her righteously reproachful amah.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WAY OUT.

THE amah had been very badly frightened by her mistress's long absence. She had even sought out Ram Singh and excitedly demanded his help, and nothing but the old man's strict ideas of propriety prevented her from giving the alarm. He insisted that she should first go back and make sure that their Mem was not enjoying herself in some rocky pool just out of sight of the bathing-hut, and she had climbed a little way towards the fall when Melifred reappeared. Happily she could not get a view of the opposite bank without going through the pool and climbing up the other side, so that there was no fear of her catching a glimpse of Mrs Tournour-Durell, but it turned Melifred sick with horror to think how nearly her secret had been discovered. An alarm, a search, and the path under the fall must have come to light, and then farewell to all hope of Horace's using it that evening. She could have cringed to the two servants when they assailed her with respectful reproaches, but happily hereditary instinct assured her that there could be no worse way to secure their silence. She was sorry to have frightened them, she said calmly, but in enjoying her adventure she had forgotten the flight of time. Another day she would remember their anxiety and not stay out of sight so long; enough had been said. They responded instantly to the ruling hand, and all she had to do—though it was difficult enough—was to keep in check the impulse that beset her to conciliate them by words and gifts such as must instantly have roused their suspicions. As it was, she succeeded in maintaining the impression that their attitude of remonstrance was distinctly a liberty, only to be condoned by

the faithfulness from which it sprang, and they mounted the hill again in dignified silence. Passing the small blockhouse which sheltered the Nordenfeldt gun at the head of the rock-cut path, and crossing the courtyard, they came upon Mr Falck, who popped suddenly out of one of the buildings which served as storehouses.

"Ah, Meess Milly, goot morning to you!" he cried brightly. "I gafe Erna a messache in case I saw you not before starting. I am off for the day—so?—a sudden call to inspect a newly discovered rubber district of immense importance. You will see me at dinner, but we will put it half an hour late, if you please."

There was nothing to frighten Melifred in the change, but she had to think quickly before she could assure herself it was so, and Mr Falck's bland gaze was upon her. She gave herself an angry little mental shake as she answered. "Oh yes, I quite understand. Please don't hurry. We shall just sit on the verandah till you come, and listen to the creatures in the jungle."

Did her imagination deceive her, or was there the very faintest quiver of one side of Mr Falck's face as she spoke—such as might almost suggest that he expected her to be very differently employed? It must have been imagination, she assured herself, for he responded with his usual simple benignity.

"Kind Meess Milly—considerate as always! And may I also entrust to her a little errand for me? I had promised myself to haf a talk to-day with our yong guest, and now I must postpone it till to-morrow. Will you gif him this messache for me—that I respect his sensitif pride, but he must not indulche it too long. A virtue may become a vice when it brings suffering not only to one's own but to another and a tender heart—so? Mr Bliss and I must open our souls to one another."

"Yes, I will tell him exactly what you say," Melifred heard herself replying. "Is there anything else?"

"Nothing more. This must not be said in my little Erna's hearing—that is understood?"

"Oh, of course, Mr Falck. I will be very careful. I—I hope you will have a pleasant day."

She nodded and smiled as she turned away, but again she felt sick at heart, realising that they were only just in time in their plans for Horace's rescue. Brand's presence did portend evil, as she had guessed. She mounted the verandah steps to reach her own rooms, and glanced into the dining-room as she passed it. For the sake of coolness, both sides of the room consisted almost entirely of windows, which, as it was a warm day, were all open, whereas it was generally necessary to close those on one side, according to the wind that happened to be prevailing. Thus she could see right across the room, and across the verandah on its other side, and discovered Erna leaning over the parapet of the terrace. Once more that horrible feeling gripped her heart as she realised that it was on this face that the cliff overhung the bathing-pool. Had Erna perchance caught sight of Mrs Tournour-Durell as she made her way through the sparser growth that covered the rocks before the shelter of the real jungle was reached? It was a question that must be solved at once, and Melifred went in at one of the dining-room windows and across to the opposite verandah, and down the steps to the terrace. Erna, who seemed to be winding something in her hands, glanced round with a start at the sound of footsteps, and looked half angry, half frightened.

"What in the world are you looking at so intently down there?" Melifred was resolved to carry things with a high hand. She looked over. "Why, it does really look like a path from here!" she cried in surprise. "Only it stops short of the top."

"Of course it stops short!" said Erna snappishly. "A long way from the top, too. No one could possibly get up or down."

"I don't know—with a rope." Melifred stopped short, like the path. Her own words suggested something to her. Where had she seen a rope? Why, it was in the storehouse, only a few minutes ago. Behind Mr Falck her eye had seen, though her mind had not taken it in till now, ropes of all sorts and sizes, coiled ready for use. Her own words to Mrs Tournour-Durell came back to her—how much easier it would be if Horace could only start from the terrace, instead of having to cross the courtyard and risk discovery in the narrow confines of the rock-cut passage!

"Nonsense! Where's a rope to come from?" Erna spoke with inexplicable irritation, and turned resolutely from the terrace. "What's the good of thinking of such silly things? Papa asked me to tell you, Milly—" and she gave the message that Melifred had already received, and to which she hardly listened. Her one desire was to be by herself and think things out. The presence of the chastened and still mutely reproachful amah was no restraint on thought, and while her hair was being done—the sun had dried it during the climb up the hill—Melifred wrestled with her problem, with the mirror in front to warn her to maintain a duly impassive mien.

Two possible changes of plan had occurred to her since passing the blockhouse—the first suggested by Mr Falck's unexpected absence. If only Horace could escape during the heat of the day instead of waiting for night, and thus gain a respite of several hours before any effective pursuit could be organised! But it did not take her long to remember that there would be no one to meet him at the pool and guide him to his friends' camp, and she did not even know where it was. He might wander into the midst of the Warribows and be recaptured, or Mr Falck—though absent himself—might have left Brand on the watch in his stead. Decidedly the possible shortening of the period of anxiety would not compensate for the extra risks involved.

But the second idea seemed much more feasible. It was worth anything to avoid the courtyard and the rock passage, and also—as she remembered suddenly—the dangerous transit under the waterfall, since this incomplete path, which only started about a third of the way down the hill, led straight down into the jungle behind the bathing-pool. Given a dependable rope, which she ought to be able to obtain easily enough from the go-down, the only difficulty she could see was that Mr Tarker, waiting at the pool, would not know what had happened, and would be obliged to cross the fall again and go some way through the jungle before he could get into touch with Horace, and even then they would be on opposite banks of the river. If there were no means of crossing, the difficulty would be insuperable, of course—unless Horace was able to swim the stream, which was likely to be very swift and extremely cold

so near its source in the waterfall. For once Melifred felt herself altogether at a loss. Horace must settle it for himself. If he decided on the new path, somehow or other she would get hold of that rope and lower him down, and also make her way to the pool again to warn Mr Tarker of the change of plan.

The morning, the heat of the day, and the early afternoon passed quietly enough. Melifred wondered afterwards how it was she had not noticed that they passed too quietly so far as Erna was concerned, since for her to spend in reading the time when she was not asleep was unprecedented. But it was such a welcome change from looking over clothes, or mere aimless squabbling, that Melifred, with her mind full of tremendous issues, could only be thankful for it without reasoning about its why and wherefore. For once, too, Erna did not seem bored when the time came for the visit to the invalid. Preoccupied she might be, but she sat by and listened to Horace and Melifred talking, with the air of one who was anxious to understand if only they would allow it, and even interjected some rather inept observations of her own at intervals. At last, however, she rose again suddenly, as though a distasteful duty had been fulfilled to the very letter, and rustled out, saying that she must really sit in the shade on the terrace a little, and see whether there was a breeze anywhere. Later on, Melifred was to feel terribly guilty for not having followed her, or at least kept her under observation, but at the moment she could only think that here at last was the opportunity for all she had to say. Only she must curb her excitement rigorously, lest the silent boy should guess from her tones what he could not learn from her words.

"I have such a wonderful thing to tell you," she began, as quietly as she could—"so many wonderful things—and I must try to do it very quickly and as if they were not of the slightest importance! First of all, who do you think I saw on the other side of the river when I went to bathe this morning? Dear darling Aunt Rosamond! And I had been so dreadfully miserable all night, trying to think what was to happen to you all alone in the jungle even if I could get you out of the place—and it was quite unnecessary."

"But I don't understand," said Horace blankly. "You can't

mean that you really saw Aunt Rosamond all by herself in the jungle? It would be worse for her than me."

"She was by herself when I saw her, but of course she hadn't come there by herself." Melifred spoke in severely measured tones. "Mr Tarker is with her, and certainly one servant—more, no doubt. She said you were dreadfully needed in Bandeir, and no one knew what had become of you, so she came to see whether she could find out anything."

"But I say, how awfully sporting of her! Imagine her doing such a thing—how she must have had to rough it! It really is not fit for her. I can't think how my uncle could have allowed it."

"I believe I know her better than you do. If a thing has to be done, and there's no one else to do it, she does it at once—that's Aunt Rosamond. Well, you see, it was the happiest thing possible her being there, because just where my plan broke off she came in, and it all fits beautifully. So we arranged everything for you to escape to-night— At least, we did arrange it, but since seeing her, I have thought of another plan which seems ever so much better. But I had better tell you what I arranged with her first."

"Please," said Horace, a little confused from attempting to follow without a clue the turns and windings of Melifred's mind. "But I say, I feel awfully slack, lying here like a log while you have all the bother of making plans to get me out of this hole."

"I love making plans," said Melifred, with perfect truth. "Well, what we arranged was that at dinner-time— Can you tell when we are having dinner?"

"Yes, I can see the dining-room all lighted up. So that's all right."

"Oh yes, of course. So then you must get rid of your boy for a little— Can you manage to get him out of the way?"

"I can send him for some ice, or a durian, or soda-water, or anything that doesn't happen to be in the room and will take some time to fetch. And then?"

"Then you walk boldly across the courtyard and down the path out in the rock. If you keep in the shadow you ought to be able to get by, even if there is anybody about, which there isn't usually. The rock passage is the most dangerous place,

because if any one should happen to be coming up, you must meet them—there is no possibility of turning aside. If only I could get hold of one of Mr Falck's hats for you! It would hide your face."

"Too dangerous!" said Horace promptly. "His boy would track you like a bloodhound till he found out what you did with it. Besides, the ascending person might insist on entering into conversation. No, it's a risk that must be taken. Do I go right down to where Tasman and the rest hang out?"

"Oh no, no! You turn off where I met you that first morning—do you remember?—where there is a gate in the rock at one side. I will give you my key, and that will let you out into the path that leads down to the bathing-pool. Mr Tarker will be waiting for you there, because you will have to get across or round the pool somehow, and then cross the river by the rocks under the waterfall."

"Under the waterfall? It sounds rather a large order. Has any one ever done it?"

"I did it this morning—twice. And once before I got as far as the middle of the fall—the day that Erna and I found there was a cave under the water. But I am sure you could not do it alone, so that was why——"

"I know you think me a poor creature, but need you rub it in quite so hard? If you were able to do it——"

"Oh, but I haven't been ill, and nearly died. You know I only meant that. And really it is a horrid place—you have to hold tight the whole time, and there's only slippery moss to hold to. Even with Mr Tarker I am not sure you will be able to get across." Horace set his lips, and looked at her with mute exasperation, which she was too busy to notice. "And that's why the plan that came to me afterwards seems so much better, if only I had thought of it in time to tell Aunt Rosamond. But there is a way to let them know."

"Please go on." The tone boded ill for his acceptance of the second plan, but this did not strike Melifred.

"Why, do you know, below the terrace where Erna is sitting now there is a path which none of us have ever found before—a path down, but not a path up. It leads down behind the bathing-pool into the jungle, so that you would not have to cross

the river at all—up here, at least. And I thought if I could get a rope and lower you down, it would avoid all the crossing of the courtyard and going down the rock passage, as well as the difficulty of the waterfall.”

“You think you could lower me down? About how far is it?”

“I don’t know, but I am sure I could do it. I know exactly how it is done. You pass the rope round a tree.”

Horace waived the question politely. “And are you sure you can get hold of a rope?”

“Why, that is the wonderful thing. I saw Mr Falck come out of one of the go-downs this morning, and there were all sorts of ropes there.”

Once again he repressed the comment that rose to his lips. “And do I understand you that I pick up Tarker on the way down, as I pass the pool?”

“No, that’s the worst thing about the plan. There’s no way of getting from the pool to the path—except by going all round, under the fall and across the river again. I must either slip down first and leave a note for Mr Tarker, or go and tell him after I have let you down. What have I said that’s funny?”

Horace composed his face again. “I’m awfully sorry; it was horribly rude of me to laugh, but I couldn’t help thinking what a full evening you had planned out for yourself. When is all this to happen?”

“During dinner, of course. I shall have a headache and ask if I may stay away.”

“Well, you know best whether Mr Falck is in a suspicious frame of mind or not, but it seems to me you might find it difficult to slip out of your room if you had said you wished to stay there. Then you would have to get the rope—which I fancy would be harder than you think—unless one had been left handy for you on purpose”—Melifred looked up sharply—“and then to let me down. I’m quite sure you have no idea what a job that is. I know, from having tried it with Brand. And after all that, you propose to post away down the hill to tell poor old Tarker that all his under-water climbing has been for nothing, and get up here again quick enough, and unruffled enough, to rouse no suspicion in any one. It seems to me that you and

Tarker get all the work. I am only a sort of parcel, to be handed from one to the other."

"I suppose this means you don't like my plan?"

"I think it's splendid theoretically, but practically it puts too big a load on your shoulders. There's too much to do in the time, if you see what I mean."

Melifred brushed away the attempted diversion. "I know what it is really," she said. "You think I should let you fall."

"I am perfectly certain you would do your very best not to," warmly. "But even with every ounce of your strength——"

"Oh, I know exactly what you mean. And of course if you didn't trust me I couldn't do it. So as you think me too weak, I am too weak."

"I think you are absolutely splendid—in every possible way, and you know I do. If you hadn't fortunately been here, there would have been no hope for me whatever."

Melifred was appeased—she could not help it—by the heartiness of the tone. "Well, it's nice to know where to come for a testimonial when one wants it," she said. "Then there will be no alterations to make in the plan I settled with Aunt Rosamond. You will just walk quietly out while we are at dinner, and I shan't even see you go!"

"Not a bit of it. You don't think I'm going to leave you here to face Falck's wrath? You come too. Just as easy for two to escape as for one, as far as I can see. Your headache will come in useful after all."

"But why in the world——? I have nothing to be frightened about—if you get away all right, that is; and if you don't, I shan't care what happens. Why, Mr Falck would think—— Oh, and I have forgotten all about the message he gave me for you! How dreadful if he asked me, and I had to confess you had never had it! I was to tell you that you and he must open your hearts to one another. He respected your sensitive pride, but a virtue becomes a vice when it brings suffering to another—yes, 'another and a tender soul'—that was it." She rolled the words forth in Mr Falck's most impressive manner.

"Oh, horrors! This is the finishing touch. I must escape to-night if I have to slip past behind Mr Falck's chair at dinner. Does he really believe that rot himself, I wonder, or is it a wolf

and lamb business? Oh, you mustn't laugh! How would you like to be accused of bringing suffering to a tender heart? I suppose"—insinuatingly—"that you didn't attempt to disabuse his mind at all?"

This was exactly what Melifred had done a week or two ago, but she had no intention of admitting it. "How could I interfere in such a very personal matter?" she inquired blandly. "Besides, you might have changed your mind again, you know."

"Since yesterday? But I suppose you think I have deserved that. Though you have a better right than anybody else to interfere, as you call it."

"Why, what right have I?" She was taken by surprise.

"Must you sit a hundred miles off over there? I could tell you ever so much better if you came nearer. Well, if you won't—because it's you I care for, and you know it. There!"

"Oh, please don't!" said Melifred, pink but resolute. "I have never given you any right to say that sort of thing to me."

"I observe you don't profess to be surprised—which I understand is the proper thing."

"How could I be surprised? You are doing exactly what Mr Falck said you would do."

"Wise man! You, like all girls, think it's impossible for a man's feelings to change. He knows better."

"I don't say it's impossible," primly. "But I don't think it's nice."

"I know it isn't—for me. And I'm afraid you don't find it so either. But it's true, whether you like it or not. You are the girl I am going to marry, if I marry anybody."

"Vice Erna deposed," said Melifred, with deadly quietness.

"If you feel bound to put it that way, you must. At any rate, you know that she deposed herself—as you call it. And then I discovered you—your love for Bandeir, your splendid pluck—— What's the good of making a catalogue about it? It all comes down to one thing—you."

"Oh, don't!" her tone was despairing now. "It's so dreadfully ignoble. How can you expect me to be flattered——"

"I don't expect you to be flattered—far from it! I only want you to know the real state of things from me myself, so that

there may be no mistake. What you mean by ignoble I don't know. You can't mean that it's ignoble of me to care for you, so I suppose you mean that it's ignoble for you to be loved by me. Well, I'm sorry, but I can't help it. Nobody could be sorrier than I am that I made such an ass of myself about Erna, but there it is—I can't blot her out. But I would do anything to get away from her now, and you know it."

"It isn't that at all. What I meant was—can't you see?—it spoils everything—and I have always been so fond of Bandeir—and I was so glad when I thought I could help you to escape—and now you want me to *profit* by it."

"Now I am flattered, if you like. I had no idea I was such a catch. Well, if you think it's profitable to marry me, I'm afraid it's true. I do want you to profit to that extent. Will you, Melifred?" He held out his hand, but she drew still farther away.

"Oh, I can't—I oughtn't to listen to you. I am betraying Mr Falck's confidence under his own roof."

"Wait till we get outside, then." He spoke jokingly, but his voice was pained. "When the jungle is thick with Warribows all round us, I shall stop suddenly and say in a thrilling whisper, 'Melifred, will you marry me?' and then you will feel able to answer."

"But I am not coming with you. If you hadn't said all this—— But can't you see for yourself that it makes it impossible?"

"Not at all. Just the reverse. It makes it all the more proper and advisable for you to come with me."

"You won't see things! After all Mr Falck's kindness—to me, I mean"—hastily—"how could I possibly repay him by—running away with you?"

"You have the most delightful way of putting things!" said Horace ecstatically. "I should never have ventured to say it in so many words, but that's it precisely. You are going to run away with me to-night!"

"I am not. I am Erna's paid companion, and I won't leave her without a moment's notice alone in this place which she hates so much. It would not be fair."

"Oh, all right. Only, if you won't come, I won't go."

"Then I will never, never, never speak a word to you again in my life."

"Some men," said Horace judiciously, "make out that they would like a dumb wife. I shouldn't, but I would rather marry you dumb than not at all."

"But you must go. Oh, after all I have been through to try and get you out safely——! You can't be so unkind! I don't believe I could live through another night like last night. If I ask you——?"

"I have asked you."

Melifred laughed unsteadily. "No, that is just what you have not done. You have told me to come, and you won't be reasonable when I tell you I can't."

"Well, if I ask you with all due humility? Help me to get down on my knees, and I'll do it."

"No, *please*; don't ask me. I should feel so degraded."

"I am indeed flattered!" he sighed.

"Oh, you know I don't mean that! Honestly, what reason is there why I should leave the Falcks in a way that must give them a handle against all English people for ever after? I have nothing to be afraid of—they will never know that I helped you. And I have received nothing but kindness—it would be too dishonourable. So you will go—won't you? Let me feel happy to-night. And then afterwards, when you are quite safe, we can——"

"Resume this highly unsatisfactory conversation?"

"If you like to put it in that way. Oh, and leave the gate locked, and the key on the wrong side, won't you? I can put my hand over the gate and get it."

"And they say that women are romantic! For sheer hard-headedness—and hard-heartedness——"

"When I have left poor Erna to gaze down into the valley all this time while I talked to you! I must go. Shall I tell you how to make me perfectly happy? Never let me have to come and see you again here! Now call me hard-hearted, if you like!"

She waved him a gay farewell, but paused to scrub her eyes

fiercely just out of his sight, and just before coming upon the justly injured Erna, who spoke with unexpected meekness and tearfulness.

"I thought you were never coming, and there's no breeze here, and the heat striking off the rock is quite too terrible. I have got an awful headache. You will have to tell Papa I can't come to dinner."

CHAPTER XXI.

ENLARGEMENT.

It was that night of all nights that Mr Falck chose to break the rule which Erna so bitterly resented, and asked the surgeon and Mr Tasman to dinner. Melifred fully expected that Erna's headache would vanish suddenly, but though she thought she caught an impatient murmur of "Just my luck!" when she took her the news, Erna merely stretched herself wearily, and moaned that she felt far too ill to dream of coming to table. Yet she scouted the idea of fever or sunstroke, and repeated emphatically that all she needed was to be let alone, and Melifred left her reluctantly, for Erna ill was something quite new. But what a happy thing it was, she reflected, that Horace had crushed—so unkindly as she thought at the time—her own scheme of absenting herself from dinner on the plea of a headache! Poor Mr Falck would certainly have thought some epidemic was breaking out at Falckenheim, and the doctor would have been at hand to relieve his anxiety by assuring him of the perfect health of one at least of the sufferers—so that not only would the plan have failed, but Melifred would have laid herself open to suspicion. As it was, Erna's indisposition clouded her father's genial brow for a moment, but then he murmured confidentially to Melifred, "Ah, the poor little one! She knows not that to-morrow all will be well," and was happy again.

The dinner was not exactly a festive meal, and would have been very much the reverse but for the cheerful atmosphere radiated about him by the host. Dr Altmann tucked his napkin without shame into his collar, and devoted himself to his food

with a singleness of mind that forbade him to waste time on anything more articulate than a grunt, and poor Mr Tasman was so overwhelmed by the honour conferred upon him, and by finding himself in the presence of a European lady, that he hardly durst venture on a single remark. But Mr Falck noticed their silence only in so far as to talk for both of them, supplementing Melifred's dutiful—though unrewarded—attempts at conversation by a lively narrative of his adventures during the day. The rubber forest had proved delusive, as all such discoveries in Palbat had done hitherto, but he had brought off another piece of business that made him chuckle with delight.

"Ah, those sinners the Ouaribau—I haf got the better of them finely!" he said happily. "You heard they had been stealing my birds again, Meess Milly?"

"Have they? What a shame!" said Melifred. "No, I heard a great chattering among the servants this morning as I passed the poultry-yard, but it didn't strike me what it was about." She spoke hastily, aware that her thoughts had been occupied with very different matters.

"Yes, that was it. My two best cocks. I take enormous trouble"—pursued Mr Falck pathetically—"I go to unheard-of expense, in the endeavour to establish in this country a superior breed of poultry. Because white is here the colour of good luck, of success—in one word, of prestiche—I restrict myself to birds of impeccable whiteness. My little colony thrives, I please myself with visions of the future, and lo! they are dashed to the ground. To the Ouaribau a white cock is valuable—most valuable—as a sacrifice to the spirits, and they proceed to satisfy their religious instinct at my expense!"

He appealed to the doctor, who grunted, and tucked his napkin in tighter, preparatory to an attack on a fresh dish, but Mr Falck appeared to accept the grunt as evidence of sympathy. "Yes, they sacrifice, I pay—or rather my poor poultry-yard pays. But I haf my eye upon a certain villache, with which I haf lately had to take measures of discipline. Our friend Mat Ali—below"—he waved his hand generally in the direction of the Warribow quarters—"has for wife the daughter of the headman of this villache, and the headman flatters himself that this alliance

confers upon him some protection, immunity—so? Therefore he demands insolently a reduction in his poll-tax. This can't be conceded, nor must such demands be encouraged. You, Meess Milly, will recognise the truth of this from the history of your British colonies. I act promptly. Choosing my auxiliaries from the followers of Ali's brother, Mat Usop, I make my appearance with a strong force, seize the chief of the villache and the other able-bodied men and send them to a month's forced labour in chains. The tax is collected in kind from the villache chenerally, and the headman's house is burnt down. It is a severe lesson, but well deserved. I haf had no more trouble from that villache. Now, however, the headman desires to rebuild his house. I haf no obchection—since he has asked leave in a proper manner. But when my cocks are missing this morning, I remember at once that on the building of a chief's house it is necessary to propitiate the spirits with a draught of blood. I hasten to the villache, and there, in the holes prepared for the two great posts in front of the house, I discover, as I expected, my two poor birds—alife and unhurt, fortunately for the tribesmen, as I told them. In another few minutes the posts would haf been dropped upon them and reared up, and I must haf sentenced the thieves to forced labour for life. But because I desire to see my poultry safe from sacrifice for the future, I merely withdraw my permission for the building of the house—either in that place or any other. The holes dug for the posts must not be filled in, the timber is to rot where it lies—as a reminder to all the Ouaribau that the possessions of the Tuan Kaya are sacred even from the thirsty spirits."

"Then the spirits are thirsty still?" said Melifred, rather absently. She had not been listening very closely for some minutes, since seeing, as she thought, a white figure scurry past the windows opposite her, which looked on the terrace. What could it be? Surely Horace could not be going all round the house instead of across the courtyard? And most certainly he would not advertise his presence by wearing a dressing-gown, but the figure seemed to have fluttering garments of some sort.

"Yes, the spirits are thirsty still," said Mr Falck majestically and with deep satisfaction; "and so they will remain."

"So?" interjected Dr Altmann, who had a moment for talk while the dessert-plates were being put on the table. "Beware, my goot sir, lest being deprived of zeur innocuous nutriment, zey defelop a thirst for ze bloot of maidens instead of poultry, as in ze old days."

Mr Falck looked startled for a moment, then he laughed. "Of course, I remember. The poultry is only a substitute," he said. "But haf no fear, doctor—and Meess Milly, look not so pale—the Ouaribau know better than to revive such a shocking custom under their present rulers."

"Am I pale?" asked Melifred, rousing herself to speak lightly. "I didn't know it. In fact, I feel very hot. At any rate, I really am not frightened, Mr Falck."

"A maiden not belongink to ze tribe"—Dr Altmann seemed to have found a subject sufficiently gory to interest him even more than mangoes—"placed bound in ze hole to be impaled by ze descendink post——"

"Oh, please!" said Melifred. "Please don't say any more. Of course I know they used to do such things, but one doesn't want to go into details. That sort of thing is really rather horrid to think of, isn't it?" She turned again to Mr Falck, with a desperate desire to engage his attention, to keep him in conversation. For with the corner of her eye she could see hovering in the verandah, as though anxious but half afraid to be observed, a yellow-faced, under-sized figure in white clothes. She could not see him distinctly, but—whether owing to her guilty conscience or not—he recalled to her mind the boy who had been in attendance on Horace. She would still have protested that she was not frightened, but the nervous tension which had held her throughout the meal had increased till she was all a-quiver with anxiety, though she was not going to give way to it. She had been about to rise from the table, but now she took another piece of pineapple from the dish nearest her, and wrestled aimlessly with it while she looked at Mr Falck for an answer.

"In the highest degree horrid," he replied sympathetically. "But be not afraid, Meess Milly, there are no facilities here for the Ouaribau to purchase slaves for sacrifice, and they will not find in me the complaisance of their Malay rulers, who would sometimes present them with a girl for the purpose. You haf

heard the doctor say there was a rule against sacrificing a maiden of their own."

"I think it was almost worse to sacrifice a slave," Melifred was talking against time, for the yellow face had drawn nearer the window, and she felt certain it belonged to Horace's boy. "One of their own girls might at least have gloried in the thought that her death was to bring good luck to her tribe, but a slave would only feel that it was doing good to the people she had most reason to wish to harm."

"Meess Milly is becoming a psycholochist!" said Mr Falck indulgently to the other two. "Do you not fear to eat so much of that pineapple, my dear Meess Milly? It seems to me very tough. Leave it, leave it, and we will choin you on the verandah in a few minutes—so? But who is that?"

Perhaps it was the nervous glance she could not restrain that drew his eye to follow it to the eager face at the window. "Come in!" he called sharply in Malay, and the boy entered, with the same blend of confidence and fear in his manner as before.

"Is my Tuan here, Tuan?" he asked, looking round. The needless question—since he could see the whole of the room from the window at which he had been standing—was possibly his way of breaking the news.

"Your Tuan—Tuan Balisi? Is he not in his room?" Mr Falck's voice expressed enormous—even excessive—surprise. "Haf I not told you never to lose sight of him, lest he should wander away and do himself an injury?"

"My Tuan bade me prepare him a cooling drink, Tuan," in injured tones. "The right kind of fruit was not at hand, and I had to go and ask the cook-boy for ice. When I came back my Tuan was not in his room, and—and—" he wavered under Mr Falck's terrible gaze until bidden sternly, "Speak!" "There is a rope hanging down the cliff from the terrace—" he could hardly bring out the words.

"A rope!" Mr Falck and Melifred repeated the words simultaneously. Wildly endeavouring to look innocent, astonished, concerned, indifferent, all at once, in case any one should glance in her direction, Melifred had followed the brief Malay conversation breathlessly, till this unexpected news forced the

exclamation from her lips. Instantly Mr Falck turned and looked at her.

"This is what I haf always feared since I saw the poor yong man's state," he said heavily. "Any one who has given him assistance has incurred a very grafe responsibility. A search must be set on foot at once, in case he should succeed in reaching the base of the hill and run foul of the Ouaribau guards."

"I think I will go and see how Erna is," said Melifred, trying to speak naturally with a dry mouth.

"You will remain where you are," said Mr Falck sternly. "I will not haf my poor little one's peace disturbed until we know the worst that has happened."

He went out, beckoning to the boy, and Melifred sat on in her place at the table, feeling alternately burning hot and icy cold. The doctor, still eating and drinking at intervals, eyed her dispassionately in his less occupied moments, and Mr Tasman devoted himself—apparently from pure embarrassment—to a pot of Chinese conserves, consuming one weird-looking object after another without uttering a word. Melifred's brain was in a whirl. What could the rope mean? Had Horace changed his mind suddenly—perhaps discovered something that thwarted the plan they had agreed upon? But how had he got the rope? and how lowered himself from the terrace without assistance? Or could it be that he had taken the boy into his confidence, and bribed him to fasten the rope there to divert attention from the real way of escape? If so, it would seem that the boy was playing him false, and had given the alarm as soon as he had started. But there was nothing to show what had really happened, and she could only sit and wait and pray. Her lips did not move, she seemed entirely engrossed in the lights flitting about outside, and the murmur of confused sounds that came to her ears, but her whole being was poured forth in one wordless cry for Horace Berringer's life and escape from captivity. She had no thought for herself, but presently it was brought home to her that she also was in danger. Mr Falck came in, and threw himself into his chair.

"We cannot find him!" he announced sorrowfully. "We haf searched everywhere. Now I haf sent a messenger to the Ouaribau camp. Till he returns we can know nothing."

"Oh, but surely you can go down yourself, Mr Falck!" cried Melifred indignantly, not knowing what to believe. "They may have taken him prisoner, and be waiting to see whether you want him saved."

"The Onaribau take no prisoners—you should know that, Meess Milly. This is what I haf feared. Poor yong man! poor yong man!"

"Please, may I go and see Erna now?" Melifred spoke in a small weak voice, feeling as though she had no strength left.

"Not yet. Haf you no shame, that you seek refuge in the company of the maiden you haf bereft of her lover? I haf treated you with confidence, you knew my hopes, if once the delusions that clouded the poor youth's mind could be dissipated. Yet you permit yourself to humour those delusions—impelled, doubtless, by a motive whose existence you strenuously denied to me."

"He had no delusions," said Melifred, trying to speak calmly.

"So? Then why does he quit this house—where he has met with nothing but kindness—secretly, in the darkness, without a word of gratitude or regret, or the slightest shadow of a reason? Why, pray, unless his mind had been warped by the influence of one moved by the meanest of all human emotions—chealousy of the love inspired by another? One, moreover, who goes so far as to lend him active assistance in his unmannerly departure?"

Melifred's heart was too full to speak. She wanted to say everything at once—absurd though it would sound to reply. "He thought you tried to murder him before, and meant to try it again. He was afraid you were going to speak to him about being reconciled to Erna." Anything of this kind would sound like the clearest evidence of delusions to the two men who were listening. At last she fastened on the one fact as to which she could speak positively.

"You have no right to talk to me like this, Mr Falck. You say he has escaped by means of a rope. I assure you most solemnly that I have had nothing to do with a rope of any kind."

"Yet I myself perceived your eyes wander eagerly to the ropes in the go-down this morning, and the cook-boy testifies that he saw your amah creeping past the cook-house in the heat of the day with a rope over her arm."

"Then she must have got it for herself, for she certainly didn't for me," said Melfred decisively. "Please call her and ask her about it."

"In a moment, in a moment!" Mr Falck's voice was full of reproof. "Haf you not patience to wait to chustify yourself until it appears whether the unfortunate victim of your—indiscretion—is alive or dead?"

"But he is not the victim—that's just it." Melfred stopped short. What was the good of bandying words with Mr Falck while Horace Berringer's life hung in the balance? She sank back into her chair and stared unseeingly at the table, while Mr Falck gave a deep sigh, and lit a cigar with a hand that trembled visibly. The doctor poured himself out another glass of wine, and Mr Tasman, discovering to his astonishment that he had arrived at the end of the pot of preserves, stretched out a hand nervously towards the dish of mangoes, withdrew it hurriedly when he found, as he imagined, Melfred's tragic eyes fixed upon him, then plucked up his courage, and seized one of the fruit with desperate bravado. For some time—it may have been only a few minutes, but it felt like hours—they sat thus, the silence unbroken save by Mr Falck's impressive sighs and smothered words of regret. Then there came the sound of footsteps—quick, decided footsteps of doom—and Brand appeared. Unconsciously Melfred's mind observed that he was wearing the stained and ragged habiliments of travel, and deduced that he was supposed to have arrived at Falckenheim only at this moment.

"I've got in earlier than I expected, sir," he said hastily, as Mr Falck lifted his head and looked at him without greeting. "I know you didn't expect me till to-morrow. I came on a horrible thing—down below. Can I speak to you? Ah, Miss Corvin, how do you do? I little thought to bring news like this with me when I was hustling my men all day to get here quickly."

He took her inert hand, which fell from his clasp like a lifeless thing, and looked enquiringly into her face. Mr Falck nodded.

"Yes," he said, "we are in grafe anxiety. We feared something of this. But come with me. Meess Milly, let me entreat you to employ this interval in making up your mind to tell the whole truth about this terrible affair. Our only desire is to shield you"—why should he associate Brand with him in the

desire? she wondered—"but how can we do it if you will not be open with us? It was a natural impulse, doubtless—even a noble one—to distrust the medical reports of the poor yong man's state, and yield to his importunities. You fully believed you were doing him a kindness. We are your friends, we shall not chutch you harshly because the kindness was mistaken, or because it has had a shocking outcome. But honesty we do expect from you, and for my part I shall be deeply disappointed if it is not forthcoming."

He went out, shaking his head; but Brand, following him, stopped by Melifred's chair to say hurriedly, "Don't say anything if you'd rather not. You know I believe in you, whatever comes out. I'll stand by you."

She ought to have wept, to have sobbed out broken thanks for this touching confidence in the face of all appearances, but her stubborn will held her dumb. What did Brand mean by talking of "whatever comes out," and offering to stand by her? There was nothing to come out of which she could be ashamed, no conceivable emergency in which she would welcome his support. Instead of the glance of gratitude he evidently expected, she gave him one of indignation, and surprised, as she thought, one of malignity in return. But that might have been merely imagination. Perhaps she could not be fair to Brand; at any rate, she was not going to try. She heard him catch up Mr Falck on the verandah, heard their receding voices talking of "the body . . . Warribows . . . the head," and fell limply back in her chair, overcome with a feeling of deadly sickness. It was the curious eyes of the two silent men that revived her—the doctor's hostile, Mr Tasman's, beady though they were, holding something of interest, if not sympathy—and she gripped the edge of the table hard to keep herself from fainting. This moment's respite before she knew the worst—it must not be wasted; there was something to think out. Yes, that was it. Why was Mr Falck so determined to make out that Horace was mad, and that she had known it? Why had he deliberately provided himself beforehand with an excuse for casting doubt upon her evidence? Why was Brand putting himself forward as a friend and sympathiser? The plot was beyond her fathoming, for she knew too little about it, but one thing became clear

to her as she sat there with her mental senses sharpened by agony—that whether Horace were alive or dead, his reputation was in her hands, and attempts were to be made to traduce it through her. It might even be that Mr Falck had himself had the rope placed in position in order to support his accusation—whatever it was. She must hold fast to the simple truth; if hard pressed, she must admit that she had tried to help the prisoner to escape, but no blandishments from her employer, or proffers of assistance from Brand, must lead her to accept their devious byways as roads to safety. So much she owed to the man who had that day declared himself her lover, whatever happened to herself.

A curious peace came to her when her bewildered brain had arrived at this conclusion. It was as though she had taken a firm stand, amid conflicting currents, on a rock which could not be moved, and she waited motionless, a merciful numbness stealing over her mind. Then there were lights in the courtyard again—she could see them as she sat half turned round in her chair—and Mr Falck looked in at one of the verandah doors.

"I did not send for you, doctor, because it was obvious you could do nothing. Be so good as to bring Meess Milly out here."

Was it an ordeal by blood? That was the fantastic thought that crossed Melifred's mind as, refusing Dr Altmann's support, she stepped out and to the edge of the verandah, and looked down. Blood was dropping on the rocky floor of the courtyard from the burden which the servants had carried in, and set down in the light of the flaring torches carried by others of their number. She forced herself to look at it—the limbs flaccid under the thin white clothes, one hand hanging down—the hand she had refused to take, how many hours was it ago? The upper part of the body was covered with a rough cotton cloth, through which ominous stains were oozing.

"I would have given my right arm that this should not have happened!" Mr Falck was saying. She wondered dreamily whom he expected to impress—the servants? herself? Brand?—or whether acting had become a second nature to him. "I loved him as a son; he was to have become my son. Maiden!"

with fiery indignation he turned upon Melifred—"must you behold all your work?"

He descended the steps. Could he really intend to force upon her the piteous sight of the Warribows' handiwork? If he did, she could hold out no longer, must confess anything that was asked of her, rather than gaze on that. She drew back a step with an unconscious gesture of repulsion, then stopped suddenly. On that poor limp hand, hanging unheeded from the bier, was a ring, and Horace Berringer had never worn rings. Some one else had noticed the same thing. Mr Tasman's voice spoke eagerly from behind her.

"Sir, this may be the body of Bliss, but it bears the ring of Alvez. I can swear by it."

"Alvez!" Mr Falck gave vent to a German imprecation of so tremendous a character that even the doctor jumped. He went forward a little, stopped, then went on again, following Mr Tasman, who had pressed to the side of the corpse, and taking advantage of the momentary diversion, Melifred made her escape. She fled blindly in the direction of the room she shared with Erna, holding her hands tight over her mouth to keep back the screams which threatened to break from her now that the tension had snapped. As she ran along the verandah a crouching figure sprang out of her way with a shriek. It was one of the amahs—she did not know which and did not care what ailed her—sitting at Erna's door. Here was refuge at last, and she burst into the room, and negotiating the mosquito-net rather by instinct than skill, flung herself upon her bed and laughed and cried till she was exhausted. Horace was not killed—nay, in some extraordinary way his escape had probably been assisted by the tragic mistake which had caused the death of the unfortunate Spaniard in his place. In vain was Mr Falck's attempted terrorism, Brand's deceptive friendliness, vain the plot—whatever it was—which they had hoped to use her in furthering. All the last hour was an evil dream. Horace was safe—safe—safe!

Sheer weariness reduced her to silence at last, and she lay quiet, panting a little. So frightful had been the strain that once it was removed she felt as if she had passed from hell to heaven. But now sounds of distress forced themselves on her ears—long-drawn sobs, low terrified weeping. Alike by nature

and training she was one of those who go through life ministering rather than ministered unto, and she sat up, and pushing back the hair which had fallen over her face, listened. The sounds came from Erna's side of the room, and in a moment she was on her way thither. Erna! Alvez! the headache! the rope! some vague idea of the course of the tragedy was already forming itself in her brain. Erna's amah was crouching outside the mosquito-net, as near her mistress as possible, and Erna herself was lying in a crumpled, sobbing heap on her bed. Melifred felt her way in under the curtain, and laid a hand on her gently. It was shaken off with a scream, and a fit of shivering shook the bed.

"Erna, what is it? Don't cry so. What has happened?"

The sobs continued, but presently unintelligible words mingled with them, and by degrees Melifred managed to make out that Erna was blaming her for something—apparently for not coming when she was wanted, and then for screeching like a parrot, so soothing to a person with a headache! But the mention of the headache was too much, for Melifred's nerves were worn very thin this evening. She put out her hand again, and gave the other girl a little shake.

"I shan't stay with you unless you tell me the truth, Erna. How can I help you if I don't know what is the matter?"

In broken sentences, interspersed with tears and sobs, Erna told her story, impelled at first by that mysterious yearning for comradeship which makes even an irreparable ill seem less overwhelming if it can be shared with another. But by the time she finished she had progressed through reproaching Melifred for lack of sympathy to transferring the whole burden to her shoulders, for the excellent reason that it was all her fault. She ought to have known from the moment they first saw poor Mr Alvez that Erna would find in him a kindred soul. The go-between, it seemed, was the amah Lola, herself a Chinese from Manila; but whether the young Spaniard approached her first, or Erna betrayed such an interest in him as stimulated her to acquaint him discreetly with his good fortune, the narrative failed to make clear. Messages conveyed by means of flowers were all that passed the first day, but the terrace and the rough path below it offered opportunities that no lover could resist.

When Melifred supposed her to be looking out wearily over the country she hated, Erna was drinking in the adoration of her admirer, as expressed by reverential gestures southern in their warmth, or letting down a string made of all her ribbons knotted together to draw up a note. Yet it was all merely to pass the time—or so she assured Melifred. She knew her father would never hear of her marrying him, and she herself did not even wish it—it was Alonzo she wanted to marry—but it was all so delightfully romantic.

"And then this morning"—she concluded, with a distinct sense of injury—"Papa talked about a rope. We were looking over the terrace, and he said how easily any one could get up and down if there was somebody to hold a rope. So I asked Lola, and she said she knew where she could get one—and she took a message—and he said he would come if the devil and all his angels stood between—and"—a sob—"I would have told you all about it if you hadn't always been so horrid about Alonzo and everything. And he came up in the dark—just like Romeo—and he kissed my hands—and he begged me to be there every night—and I said no, not *every* night, perhaps sometimes—and that boy, that horrid boy of Mr Bliss's—came along the terrace, and saw him. I screamed—it was only one little tiny scream—and he said I should ruin us both, and he let himself down the rope—and I heard him scrambling down the path—and he must have missed his way in the dark, and got down into the jungle instead of back to his quarters. And—is it true, Milly—did Lola see them bring him into the courtyard—dead?"

"Yes, it is true," said Melifred, under her breath.

"Oh, how dreadful!" said Erna in a depressed voice. "I hoped it might turn out to be Mr Bliss after all. Milly! couldn't you pretend it was *you* he came to see, and I just happened to be there? Papa can't do anything to you, you see, but he might make me marry some one awful, or even send me to school again—or anything."

"Papa is much obliged for the hint," said Mr Falck's voice through the window, making both girls jump. How the big man could have come so close without their hearing him, Melifred could not imagine, but there he was. "A goot husband is an excellent teacher for the giddy maiden—so?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPIRITS ARE THIRSTY STILL.

FEW people in Falckenheim went to bed that night; Mr Falck certainly did not. His first care, after learning his daughter's share in the events of the evening, was to induce the amah Lola, by more or less gentle persuasion, to allege that it was she who had lured Alvez to his doom by means of messages sent in her mistress's name, in the hope of attracting his affections to herself. The rest of the night he spent in a systematic search of the grounds and buildings. Precious time had already been lost, but Falckenheim and its neighbourhood could still be scoured for the fugitive whose traces had been so tragically obscured. It was morning when Brand came in from heading a party of Warribows, and sought his employer.

"You haf not found him?" asked Mr Falck.

"No, sir; but I can tell you where he is. Mrs Tournour-Durell is encamped on an island in the river—two miles or so down from here."

"So!" said Mr Falck slowly. Then his eyes gleamed. "Has she an escort—troops or police?"

"Not in uniform, but old Tarker is with her, and some natives. They are quite ready for business—called out that they would fire if any one tried to approach the camp in the dark. After that, I thought it was as well not to rush things, but to see what you thought."

"Much better. Only two miles from here, you say? Strange that we should not haf heard of their arrival."

"The camp is well hidden— island covered with jungle. I

suppose they crossed to it by rafts, unless they have brought a collapsible boat. But what I am wondering, sir——"

"Yes?" said Mr Falck encouragingly.

"I wonder whether they have been getting at the Warribows. I should have known nothing of the camp but for that fellow of Mat Usop's you sent with me. He insisted there was some one on the island, though all the rest declared there was nothing there, and tried to get me to go past. I can't swear that they trod on sticks or did anything of that sort to give the alarm, but it struck me it was quite possible."

"Are we quite encompassed with treachery?" demanded Mr Falck with furrowed brow. "'Whom can we trust?' is the question I ask myself—and when I trust a man, I lose him! Poor Alvez, now—I am deeply grieved to have lost him, for I hoped to do great things in the Philippines by his means. He was wanted by the Manila police for embezzlement, but that could easily have been arrached, and I should have had a hold on him. How often does the folly of youth frustrate the designs of its would-be benefactors!"

"And I suppose the rope he used gave Bliss his chance of getting away—either while Alvez was occupied on the terrace or just before the alarm was given?" asked Brand sympathetically.

"I think not. He must have been seen by some one. No, my belief is that he escaped by quite a different way. I have found a key in the gate at the head of the path leading to the bathing-pool."

"But that leads nowhere, sir. How could he get away?"

"That I can't tell. He may have swum the river, though I can hardly believe it. Or his friends may have rescued him with a collapsible boat—of which I had not thought—or by means of a rope conveyed across."

"It doesn't really matter. The main thing is that he's gone," said Brand disconsolately. "But how do you think he got the key, sir?"

"That I can't swear, as you say. But an eye will be on the watch when Meess Milly comes to the gate to-morrow morning, to see whether she expects to find the key there."

"But if it's her key, she must have given it him."

"I have no intention of raising the question. It is merely to

satisfy my own mind. Tell me, Brand—this camp on the island, did it appear in confusion, as if about to break up?"

"Not in the least, sir. Everything was quiet."

"Again I am right. They will not go without Meess Milly. And that relieves me from a difficulty. I could not turn a yong girl adrift here in Palbat, yet it is surely asking too much to expect me to incur the expense and trouble of a chourney to the coast and a schooner to Singapore on her behalf. I am reluctantly compelled to dismiss her from my family for gross carelessness—amounting to a breach of trust. I engache her to watch over my daughter, the apple of my eye, and she repays my confidence with the most absolute treachery."

"Then you will let her go away with them quietly, sir?" Brand was out of his depth. His astonished tone roused Mr Falck to a touch of scorn.

"Think, Brand! How far will they go?"

"Oh, you mean——? You are still sticking to that plan, then, sir—the attack in the jungle, I mean?"

"Why not? The problem is merely simplified by the addition of Bliss and Meess Milly to Mrs Tourneur-Durell's party. We haf one regrettable outbreak of savagery instead of two or three, and all the inconvenient personages are removed at one blow."

"But will the Warribows—I mean, I am thinking about what I told you just now, sir."

"The Ouaribau will follow their chief, and if I find it necessary to substitute Mat Usop for Mat Ali in the chiefship, it is merely a step I haf for some time had in contemplation."

"But you suggested—when we talked of this before, I mean—that Miss Corvin—that I——"

Mr Falck waved his hand majestically. "Let that pass. Meess Milly has shown herself unworthy of my consideration for her. I could not impose her as a wife upon any yong man to whom I wished to show kindness. Quite otherwise. In one word, Brand, I require a husband for my daughter. On certain conditions, I am willing to consider you for the post. I need not dilate upon her beauty and other attractions—an affectionate parent is apt to become garrulous, and you haf eyes in your head. You are ambitious, and I am prepared to make

such arrangements as will gratify you in this respect. I don't pretend you may not have a little difficulty with Erna at first, but I believe you are as well acquainted as myself with the secret of managing a wife—let her know early that the hand which caresses is also the hand that corrects—so?"

"And the conditions, sir?" asked Brand, his mouth watering.

"You have probably guessed them already. This Bander Palbat imbroglio must end. I have sunk much money in it—too much; it threatens to ruin me. Once you have failed in the mission entrusted to you through half-heartedness—nervousness—what shall I say? This time there must be no failure. I give you *carte blanche*, but none of these people from Bander must leave Palbat alive. On the day you bring me proof of their deaths I present you to Erna as her future husband; on the day I take over the sovereignty of Bander you marry her. Naturally all must be done on the lines I have laid down, dislike them as you may—it is absolutely necessary that nothing be brought home to us, no suspicion be excited, even. The party here must be accounted for wholly by the Ouairibau—or rather the Mahkyoons—and it must be so managed that even if any of the natives with it should escape, they can say nothing to the contrary. There is your problem. Construct a possible solution, and bring it to me. Be assured that I will aid you in every way—whether you decide to turn to account the rivalries of the brothers Ali and Usop, or to act with the tribe as a whole, and leave me to eliminate the unwanted in the process of inflicting punishment. But the heads of the four whites I must have; that is the essential. Will you attempt the solution?"

It was only for a moment that Brand wavered, and it was the memory of the way in which Melifred had turned from him the night before that tilted the balance against her now. She preferred that silly ass Bliss to him, did she? Very well; then she might share Bliss's fate! "Yes, I'll do it!" he said.

"So!" said Mr Falck. "Then I will amuse myself this morning by paying a call on Mrs Tourneur-Durell. It will interest me to see whether her nephew cares to show himself, and to read the expressions on their faces. It will be a fine surprise for them to see me appearing as an ordinary visitor, and to

learn that my errand is to request them to take charge of Meess Milly. You, if you will take my advice, will snatch a brief rest, so as to come with a clear mind to the consideration of your problem."

He waved his hand as he strode away—the picture of geniality and kind consideration, and Brand was conscious of something like awe. He had thought himself fairly hardened as regarded means and ends, but he was a child beside this light-hearted elder who bought murder with matrimony, and planned wholesale massacre with a smile. Was his callousness to be accounted for by a secret past of crime, or had he really emerged from the sordid everyday surroundings of a Hamburg counting-house to juggle with lives and found kingdoms? The fact that his nation came late to the work of colonisation would account for the indifference with which he viewed what to the European in the dark places of the earth is the unpardonable sin—the stirring up of coloured men against white. Brand himself shrank from this extreme, though a varied youth spent in the China Ports had not tended to make him scrupulous. But besides the lure of ambition skilfully dangled before him, there was as a goad in the rear the thought that he knew too much to make it safe to refuse the path indicated. Mr Falck and he were in one another's hands for the future, their interests could not be severed, and should Brand show any sign of forgetting this, the little poisoned arrows of the Warribows might be relied upon effectually to shut his mouth. The moment Mr Falck had foreshadowed in so many words the deaths of Mrs Tourneur-Durell and her party, Brand was committed to him body and soul. Even if he had wished to warn them, which he did not, it would have been at the price of his own life.

Mr Falck had still something important to do before he took his own advice and snatched a little rest previous to paying his call. He sent for Pelagie, and on her appearing, metaphorically tore her to tatters. In the confidence, which had been so tragically falsified, that in this wilderness it was absolutely impossible for her charges to get into mischief, the good woman had allowed her thoughts to be diverted to the subject of her own rather belated establishment in life. A stout Dutchman who acted as storekeeper showed a readiness to be captivated by her elderly

charms, and they had found many opportunities for sweet converse during the last few weeks. As she pointed out tearfully, the visits of the young ladies to the invalid gentleman were authorised by Mr Falck himself, and she was particularly informed that her presence was not needed; how was she to know that there was any possibility of danger on the way thither?

"You should have known; that is what I complain of," said Mr Falck magisterially, in his German-French with its sharpened consonants. "Silence, woman! cease this whimpering and listen. Miss Corvin leaves my house to-day; she is unworthy of my trust. You I retain for no other reason than that my daughter must not be without a European attendant. But at the first sign that you are again neglecting your duties, out you go into the jungle, with your wages in your hand, to make your way back to civilisation as best you can. Miss Corvin has friends to whom I can hand her over, you have not. But I understand you have been making eyes at Mayer. Very well; see if he will have anything to say to you when I dismiss you!"

Thoroughly cowed, the wretched Pélagie fell on her knees, and vowed sobbingly that she would never, never speak to Mayer again. Never would she even look in his direction; her sole concern, day and night, should be the safeguarding of Mlle. Falck. Mr Falck cut her short.

"That is what I wish," he said. "You are not to let her out of your sight, night or day. I expect to see her married before very long, but till then you are responsible for her. Now go."

Mingling protestations of gratitude and contrition with tears for the past and promises for the future, Pélagie permitted herself to be urged out of her employer's presence, and departed, full of new-born zeal, to take up her duties afresh. But all unknown to himself, Mr Falck had been engaged in shutting the stable-door after the steed had disappeared.

Like the other inhabitants of Falckenheim, Melifred had passed a broken night, though it was spent in her own room. It was Erna's turn to be hysterical after her father's pronouncement, and long after midnight she was still breaking out anew into wild outcries when she seemed to have settled

down exhausted. When at last Melifred dropped asleep, tired out, it was only to be awakened in a very few minutes. Erna had suddenly been seized with a consuming interest in Horace's fate, and was demanding whether he had escaped, whether Melifred had helped him, and how and whether he had really got away. Melifred parried her inquiries as best she could, but by persistent questioning Erna managed to get a very fair idea of what had happened. When she had succeeded thus far, she turned unexpectedly cross.

"Well, there's nothing very wonderful in that, I'm sure! It seems to have been as simple as possible; I don't know what you wanted to make such a mystery about. Do go to sleep; I don't want to be talking all night!"

Much relieved by the assurance, Melifred let her heavy head fall on the pillow again, and slept soundly till dawn. Then something waked her, she did not know what—some sound, for which there seemed nothing to account. It was curious, too, that the maids were not about. She did not know that Pélagie was at the moment weeping under her master's scathing reproof, that Lola was imprisoned in an empty go-down until she could be dealt with in a manner befitting the heinousness of the crime to which she had confessed, and that Nina, the other amah, filled with a well-grounded anxiety on her own account, was kneeling huddled against the end wall of Mr Falck's verandah, with her ear to the largest crevice she could find, trying in vain to make head or tail of what was going on. Melifred looked across the room; Erna seemed strangely quiet. A sudden thought struck her, and she ran across and lifted the mosquito-curtain. Erna was not there. Her clothes were gone too, and—as Melifred discovered in a moment—her sun-hat. Could she have gone to bathe? It was most unlike Erna to go alone, and without waking every one within hearing by talking. Could she possibly have run away? The very idea seemed absurd, and yet, as Melifred flung on her clothes, she thought it less absurd than it looked at first. Erna had a way of coming to sudden desperate decisions, and embarking on them regardless of such minor considerations as possibility or propriety, as when she flung her challenge before Horace at Thakip. The very habit of subservience to her father would incline her to act secretly,

if she had taken the tremendous resolution of defying him, and the important questions where she was to go, and how she was to get there, would be quite likely not to occur to her till later. At any rate, Melifred had no difficulty in guessing what would be her first step towards freedom—the conversation of the night made that certain enough—and she felt a lively relief in the conviction that Erna would never pluck up courage to attempt the passage under the waterfall by herself. She would be discovered, damp and disconsolate, shivering on the brink, and they would return together as though they had simply been down to bathe. But there was no time to await the tardy arrival of the maids—one of whom, by the bye, was probably in attendance on Erna—and wondering resignedly at the unaccountable absence of the others on this of all mornings, Melifred took the two bathing-dresses and went out. She was surprised to see none of the servants about as she crossed the courtyard, never guessing that such of them as were not sleeping off the excitements of the night had hidden themselves on her approach, knowing her to be out of favour, and not desiring to have anything to do with her. But the old Sikh Ram Singh was duly waiting in his accustomed place, with his accustomed patience, in case he should be wanted, and rose rheumatically to follow her. She asked him if Erna and the amah had gone on before her, but he had not been waiting long, and had seen no one, and there was nobody else to ask. The key was in the gate, on the farther side, as she had asked Horace to leave it, which told nothing, and she let herself through and hurried down the path, with Ram Singh making heroic efforts to keep up with her. She had been so certain she would find the amah in the bathing-hut and see Erna on the farther side of the pool, that it gave her a shock to meet nobody and receive no answer when she called out. But she comforted herself with the thought that no doubt Erna had come alone—which was certainly far wiser if she was really trying to run away—and was lying down among the rocks as she herself had done the day before, trying to make up her mind to the plunge under the curtain of spray. Whether she really heard or not, of course she would pretend that no calls reached her.

It was tiresome to have to cross the pool to get to her, but there was no help for it, and without stopping to undress, Melifred

began to scramble round its rocky sides. Underlying her haste was a fear which she would not confess even to herself—the fear that Erna's desperation might even tempt her to suicide when she found herself unable to dare the passage of the falls. Once again her heart sank when, pausing at the summit of the rocks to wring out her drenched skirts, she saw that Erna was not there. Yet she had been there, for close to the fall there lay a handbag which belonged to her. It contained a motley collection of jewellery, evidently snatched up and stuffed in hastily, which confirmed Melifred's guess. Erna was running away, and had been minded not to go empty-handed, but circumstances had forced her to abandon her spoils. What circumstances? With a sickening dread Melifred glanced down at the dark whirlpool at the foot of the falls, fearing to see a frail figure with outspread pale gold hair washing round and round in it; but nothing of the kind was there, nor could she see any trace of Erna either farther down the course of the river, or on the opposite bank. Obviously, then, the only thing to be done was to see whether she was clinging to the rocks under the fall, afraid to move one way or the other. But Melifred doubted her own power to bring her back safely in that case, and on the impulse of the moment she scrambled round the pool again, and sought Ram Singh at his post. It was most difficult to make him understand what she feared, and still more difficult to induce him to intrude upon the sacred spot from which it was his duty to warn off all trespassers, but at last she got him to the edge of the pool, and explained to him the way of getting round it. Very naturally he thought it would be far better to go back and get help from Falkenheim, and Melifred had as much as she could do to make him understand her fear that Erna's strength would not hold out so long. By dint of helping him strenuously herself—and getting drenched from head to foot in the process—she brought him to the brink of the falls, but it was with chattering teeth that he followed her through the curtain of falling spray, holding tight to her gown. Disappointment awaited them when their eyes became accustomed to the greenish semi-darkness under the fall, for Erna was not there. Releasing herself from Ram Singh's clutch on her skirt, Melifred bade him by signs hold fast to the moss-covered wall, and herself clambered round

the projecting rock in the middle, and so to the other side. There she realised that Erna had succeeded in getting across after all, had dared by herself the peril of the transit and accomplished it, for a sodden mass on the ground revealed itself as a puggery which had once been snowy white, with gaily striped ends in blue and gold, torn from a sun-hat. Clearly Erna's hat had been soaked either in the pool or by the falling water, and she had discarded the puggery on account of its weight. It was some comfort to realise that she had been sensible enough to keep the hat, though it was disquieting to think where her wanderings, in a jungle swarming with Warribows, might already have landed her.

There was only one thing to be done. Melifred went back to Ram Singh, and partly by encouraging gestures, partly by main force, induced the poor old man to make the perilous passage. His joy and bewilderment on finding himself at the other side, and still alive, was pathetic, but Melifred had no time to spare for it. Hurriedly she explained that they must follow the fair Miss Sahib at once, and catch her up before she could get very far, and on they went. Happily Erna's wet garments had left a quite visible trail, since the sun was not yet hot enough to dry it, and they tracked her by its means at first. Then, as her clothes became drier, but suffered from the thorny creepers, there were occasional shreds of 'stuff' on the bushes, and in damp patches of ground the imprint of a high-heeled shoe. But by this time they were some way from Falckenheim, and even out of sight of it, since the dense jungle growths overhead hid even the hill that towered above them, and there was still no sign of Erna herself. In despair Melifred turned to Ram Singh.

"Ram Singh, you must go back to the castle and tell the Tuan Kaya the fair Miss Sahib is lost."

"By the favour of the Presence, which is the way to the castle?" asked Ram Singh meekly, in the jargon of mingled Malay and Hindustani which served him in this land of exile.

"Why, the way we came, of course!" said Melifred, astonished.

Ram Singh put his hands together with touching submissiveness. "The Presence will pardon, but this humble one is old

and without strength, and now he is tired also. If it is an order that he go back that way, he will obey, but if he falls into the water, who is to bring help?"

Vexed and anxious as she was, Melifred could not but acknowledge the justice of the plea. Without her help Ram Singh would have slipped to destruction more than once, and how was he to make the return journey by himself? "You must go through the jungle and find the way that leads up the hill, then. You know that it is the side away from the river, so you must turn to the right."

Ram Singh said nothing, but he wore a dumbly protesting look, which was not surprising, since the jungle was so thick that but for the sound of the waterfall in the direction from which they had come, there was nothing whatever to guide him, and they might have been a hundred miles from home. Then a happy thought struck Melifred.

"Follow the river down—it can't be far now—and you will come to an island," she said. "Tuan Balisi is encamped there, and he will send his servants to help us look for the fair Miss Sahib. Go quickly."

"But will not your honour lead the way?"

"No, I must follow her at once, in case she has hurt herself. Go; it is an order."

She went on a little, looked round, and saw Ram Singh standing doubtful and dissatisfied where she had left him. She frowned and made an imperative gesture, and went on again—to walk straight into the midst of a group of Warribows who were examining the ground carefully, apparently with the object of destroying the traces of Erna's passage, for one of them took up a little shred of lace that adhered to a tangled mass of shrubs and creepers, and bestowed it in the bag of woven grass that hung at his side. Melifred had no time to be frightened, and did not allow herself any.

"May your fields be fruitful!" she said briskly in Malay. "I seek my sister, the Tuan Kaya's daughter. Have you seen her?" It had proved impossible to make the natives understand her position with regard to Erna, and they had become accustomed to being considered as sisters. Erna's stock of

jewellery, and the greater deference with which she was treated, were entirely accounted for by a theory which its propounders found eminently satisfactory. Mr Falek had had two wives—of course at the same time—and Melifred was the daughter of the elder and unloved, Erna of the younger and more favoured one. The tribesmen looked a little startled at first, but gathered round her quickly.

"May a wealthy husband be yours, Mem!" one of them responded politely. "Your sister is a little farther on. We will lead you to her," and she moved on with them.

It was not at first that she noticed they had closed in behind, and were conducting rather than guiding her, but it did seem that Erna must be a good deal farther on, instead of only a little way. She stopped at last and questioned them, but the same man answered quite coolly that the other Mem must have gone on with the rest of their party to the village, where she could rest and refresh herself with food. Fully resolved to give Erna a piece of her mind when they met, Melifred allowed herself to be led on. Her conductors were walking much faster now, and it struck her there was a sort of exultation in their demeanour that she did not like. Yet they still answered quite courteously when she questioned them, assuring her that the village was only a short distance off, and she was anxious not to show fear, or to give them any pretext for handling her roughly. Besides, it was clear that Erna had fallen into the hands of these men or their companions, and Erna must be found. The thought crossed her mind that she hoped Ram Singh had managed to see what happened to her without being captured himself, since her escort were evidently determined not to allow her to turn back, or even to stop. Indeed, they seized the opportunity at last of coming to a *batang* to take her by the elbows and hurry her along, one on each side of her plunging through the mud on the ground-level, regardless of leeches. She had not her watch with her, so that it was difficult to tell how long her quest had lasted, but the increasing heat showed that the morning was advancing, and she began to feel faint and exhausted as her two supporters, under the guise of helping her, made her almost run along

the slippery palm-trunks. They disregarded her questions and protests, too, splashing on with a 'grim determination that frightened her, though she did not quite know why. The Warribows were Mr Falck's sworn allies. Why should she fear their ill-treating any member of his household?

It was with a blessed feeling of real physical relief that she found herself at last inside a village, and saw Erna, very ragged as to clothes and disconsolate of mien, sitting on the grass, with a number of women and girls looking at her. Melifred dropped on the grass beside her, feeling as if she could not have walked another step, and the lookers-on transferred half their attention to her. It was cheering to find that Erna seemed to be cross rather than frightened.

"So here you are at last!" she said. "I wondered whether anybody was going to look for me at all."

"But—did you want to be looked for?" asked Melifred, bewildered. "I thought you were—running away."

"Of course I didn't want to be looked for then, stupid! But when I was stopped—when those horrid creatures got hold of me and brought me here—naturally I hoped somebody would come and find me—any one would."

"But where were you going?"

"To Alonzo, of course. I wasn't going to stay at Falckenheim and be married to that Brand."

"Brand? What makes you think of him? Was that what Mr Falck meant?"

"I don't know; I sort of felt it. He was there, you see; Lola told me she had seen him. And he is just the kind Papa likes, and I hate. So I thought I would ask Mr Bliss to show me how to get to Singapore and find Alonzo."

"Ask a man you have refused to help you to run away to another!"

"Well, his aunt is there—you said so yourself—so it was quite all right. Besides, who else could I ask?"

"But you have no money, or luggage, or anything!"

"That's all you know. I had to leave the other things on the way, but I have got my pearl necklace in my pocket." She was honestly proud of this proof of forethought, and Melifred changed the subject in despair.

"I don't know how you ever walked as far as this. Even I am nearly dead."

"I didn't walk after I was tired. I made them carry me. I sat down and cried."

"Oh, Erna! You let natives see you cry?"

"Well, how could I help it? I felt like crying, so I did. And they put some sticks together and made a carrying-chair. You mightn't look quite such a figure if you had done it too."

"Well, you can't say very much——" Melifred cut short the remark which would have started a brisk interchange of home-truths. She felt out of tune for them, somehow. "But I don't think you are quite as much torn to pieces as I am."

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Erna, roused to attention by this example of self-restraint. "I wish you wouldn't talk in that sort of voice, and look so queer. If you knew what you looked like, you wouldn't do it. Anybody would say you were frightened."

"I believe I am frightened, and I don't know why," confessed Melifred in a low voice, as if the watchers could understand.

"Or perhaps—it is that I'm hungry."

"Of course!" said Erna, with considerable relief in her tone, and made signs vigorously, pointing first to her own open mouth and then to Melifred. The result of this was the appearance of a tray of different kinds of fruit, another of rice-cakes fried in oil, and a bamboo vessel of hot water. Melifred ate and drank thankfully, while Erna improved the occasion.

"Really, after all you have said, no one would ever have thought that in a real emergency like this, I should be the one to show common-sense and not get frightened. What is there to be afraid of, pray?"

Melifred looked round slowly, a little heartened by the food. There was certainly nothing alarming to be seen. The village was one of the usual kind, with five or six large houses facing a central space, and backed by fruit-trees. One house seemed to have been destroyed in some way, for there was an empty place in the circle, but a number of trunks of trees lay there, as though it was about to be rebuilt. The men of the community had all disappeared, but the women remained, and everybody knew that if danger were threatening the reverse would be the case. None

of the women seemed to speak Malay, for they made no answer when she addressed them, but they did not appear unfriendly.

"I don't know. I don't like the way they look at us, somehow," she said slowly. "I know it sounds silly."

"I should rather think it did—utterly silly. Oh, look there, Milly! Did you ever see such flowers?"

Another band of girls had approached, their arms laden with ropes of flowering creeper cut down bodily from the jungle—pink and lilac and golden and crimson and white. Others had handfuls of blossom, which they were twisting into wreaths as they walked, using long grass to secure the stalks. One of them approached Erna diffidently, and laid a wreath on her head.

Erna smiled graciously. "There now, you see!" she said. "Take off your hat; they want to give you a wreath too. Oh dear! wouldn't these orchids make a sensation in London? Think of their being all wasted in the jungle here! Now what do they want, I wonder?"

Evidently pleased by the acceptance of their offerings, the girls were arranging themselves in long lines, linked by the ropes of flowers, and then they began to advance and recede in a kind of dance, chanting as they went, and beckoning to the strangers to join them. Erna rose to her feet.

"Oh, Erna, you don't want to dance? I am so tired," said Melifred wearily, but Erna would not listen.

"Nonsense, Milly! You must always try to please savages—I have heard it said lots of times, because if you don't they think you are offended, and then they might turn nasty and want to eat you. Don't be lazy."

Reluctantly Melifred struggled up from the ground, and allowed herself to be involved in the intricate movements of the dance. She tried to keep near Erna, but the dancers divided into two parties, and they were separated from one another. Round the green they danced in opposite directions, the many-coloured flowery chains of each group crossing and interlacing, twisting and twining, until Melifred found they were winding round her so closely that she could hardly walk. But she had something else to think of.

"Erna, I believe the men are hiding behind the houses!" she turned her face to call out. The wreath had slipped over her

eyes, and she jerked her head sideways to move it, that she might see where she was going, then suddenly found herself on the brink of a large deep hole, in the open space where the timber was. She tried to draw back, but the flowery chains—strong as iron for all their soft loveliness—gripped her fast and dragged her off her feet. She could not even stretch out a hand to save herself, for her arms were held tightly to her sides, and she felt herself falling down, down. Stunned and helpless, she lay at the bottom of the hole, half smothered in flowers, unable even to push them away. There was the sound of the rush of many naked feet, then the sound of men tugging hard to move some heavy object with ropes, then something dark and thick appeared over the edge of the pit above her head. She stared up at it, fascinated. What could it be—a great baulk of timber, which grew thicker as more of it came into view? Why did she seem to be listening to Dr Altmann's voice, speaking with a kind of bloodthirsty gusto?—"a maiden not belongink to ze tribe—placed in ze hole bound, to be impaled by ze descendink post"—what had it to do with *her*?

"The spirits are thirsty still," some one had said—the spirits from which Mr Falck had rescued his white fowls. The huge post above her wavered, began to tilt downwards. For the first time in her life, Melifred fainted.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IF I PERISH, I PERISH.

"Oh, do please wake up. I don't know *what* to do!" The words reached Melifred as though from a great distance, but as usual the call for help awoke an instant response in her. She tried hard, but it seemed a long time before she could open her eyes, and then she looked into Horace Berringer's face and broke into a smile. He summoned up a smile in return, but there was something a little mechanical about it.

"Let me help you up," he said hurriedly. "There! sure you're all right? I'm afraid Erna—Miss Falck, I mean—is hurt. Oh, *please* don't faint again!"

For recollection had come to Melifred in such a rush that she turned sick and clutched at him feebly. They were standing on the brink of the pit into which she had been swept; at her feet lay scattered broken strands of flowering creeper, already fading in the hot sun, which Horace must have cut and torn from about her. The great post was still poised on the edge of its hole, and the ropes which had been meant to drag it into an upright position had but just fallen from the hands of a sullen angry crowd of tribesmen, who stood watching the white people with no good will. Close at hand lay Erna, unconscious but moaning faintly, looking like the dead Ophelia among the flowers lying over and around her. Beyond her was another pit, another huge iron-wood post ready for erecting, another disappointed crowd.

"I think she must have knocked her head in falling, but I can't find any cut," Horace went on anxiously, and Melifred loosed her hold of his arm, and walked the few steps rather

unsteadily to where Erna lay. "I had to drag her over here by her arm. I—I couldn't manage to lift her."

Melifred glanced at him as she knelt down at the unconscious girl's side, and saw that his clothes were ragged and stained and his sun-helmet battered. He looked ready to drop with exhaustion, and her protective feelings were at once aroused. "And you an invalid till yesterday!" she said. "Do sit down, or we shall have you ill again, and what to do with *two* of you on my hands——! No, I think she is stunned, nothing more. We ought to get her into the shade—and will you ask some one to bring some water?"

"Do you think you could lift her up a little, so that I could get her on my shoulder?" he asked hoarsely, disregarding the request. "I want to be off out of this before they get nasty. Salleh!" There was no answer, and he whistled sharply, then turned to Melifred again with a rather wry smile. "Tarker's hunter fellow from Thakip—splendid scout—brought me here like a bird—but no hero. I am very much afraid he has cleared out."

"And you had no one else with you? But how in the world did you manage to make them——?"

"Bluff—sheer bluff—together with taking them by surprise, I suppose. But with bluff you want to carry things off quickly, and I rather think the old headman there smells a rat."

The old headman's countenance was not prepossessing as he advanced. Indeed, it was decidedly suggestive of a street boy about to express his disdain of a vanquished foe in the usual manner. "You are a foolish man, Tuan," he said. "Had you been satisfied with making us pull up one girl out of the pit, you might have escaped with her while the spirits drank the blood of the other. But now we know that you had only one man with you, and he is running away as fast as he can, and my young men are on his heels."

"The more honour to me, then," said Horace, as easily as he could, "for coming all alone to save you from the punishment you were about to bring upon yourselves."

"Nay, Tuan, there is no question of punishment. The spirits will be refreshed by such draughts as they have not enjoyed for many years, and our fathers will also be heartened by messages

from us, so that they will join in protecting us. You will bear our messages, Tuan."

Horace changed colour a little, and Melifred saw it, and wished impatiently that they would talk Malay instead of the language of the tribes. "Why don't you tell him who you are?" she murmured hastily.

He looked at her with the ghost of a smile. "I'm afraid the mighty name won't be much good at this moment, but here goes!" He turned to the headman impressively. "Chief, you don't know to whom you are speaking. I am the son of Datu Berringer of Bandeir."

"You say that because you believe it will keep us from killing you," returned the headman shrewdly. "But we are wiser than you think, Tuan. There is a man here who testifies that you are called Tuan Balisi, that you have been an honoured guest in the house of the Tuan Kaya for many days, and that the Tuan Kaya has sworn publicly that he regarded you as a son."

"That's true, unfortunately—but so is the other. I am Datu Berringer's son, not the Tuan Kaya's. But the Tuan Kaya will avenge my death upon you."

"The Tuan Kaya will slay no more men of the tribes, and take no more slaves," said the headman significantly. "With the sacrifice that we make to-day we celebrate his destruction. His own last hour will have come when he enters this village to find his daughters buried under the doorposts of the house he forbade to be built, and his 'son' hanging bloodless from that tree."

"Oh, all right! A fine report I shall have to give your fathers—and my father—of you all!" said Horace, turning away. "Let us lift her together, and carry her under that tree," he said to Melifred, and though the sweat poured down his face, they accomplished the task. The tree was the one under which Melifred had made her meal an unknown length of time ago, and the bamboo pail was still there with the rest of the water. She dipped her handkerchief into it and began to bathe Erna's head, but she looked at Horace.

"Now tell me exactly what that old wretch said," she demanded. "I know it was something horrid. He won't let us go?"

"I'm afraid not."

"But they won't do that to us again?—and this time we should *know*. Oh, you won't let them, will you? You would kill us yourself first? I don't think it would be wrong, do you? If you knew——"

"Unfortunately," said Horace diffidently, "I—I'm afraid I have nothing to—to do it with."

Melifred remembered the Bandeir tradition. Berringers did not carry revolvers. "But you cut the ropes," she said.

"I had Salleh's parang. But—you'll think me an utter fool—unfortunately I put it down to help you up, and—when I looked again it was gone. I really am awfully sorry."

"Oh, well, don't be so dreadfully apologetic. I know you'd do it if you could. What are they going to do to you—the same as to us?"

"Oh no," with a creditable smile. "There are only two door-posts, you know. So I escape this time."

"You needn't try to make me think they mean to let you go. What are they going to do?"

"Oh, something quite mild. Give me a message to carry, the headman said—or something of that kind."

"If you don't tell me exactly what it is, I shall go and ask him."

"Can't you let well alone?" growled Horace. "Well, it's carrying messages to their deceased relations, if you will have it. I have heard about it from Tarker. They tie you up by your hands, I believe, and prick you."

"Prick you?"

"Yes, quite a small prick. But they all want to send messages, you see. You could stand a dozen or so of pricks all right, but when it comes to hundreds——"

"Then that was what they were sending out runners for!"

"Were they sending them out?"

"Yes, several, in different directions—while you were talking to the headman."

"Must be fair, you see. Might cause unpleasantness in the spirit-world if some people's ancestors got left out."

"Well, ours is quicker, at any rate," said Melifred, with trembling lips. "And perhaps poor Erna won't know any-

thing about it," looking down at the fair head on her knee. "I—I think I shall ask them to do it to me too—what they do to you, I mean."

"Don't be an idiot!" said Horace harshly. She turned a piteous look upon him, and he relented at once. "I say, I'm awfully sorry. I didn't mean—— I know you meant it well, but can't you see how much worse it would make it for me to see you slowly tortured?"

"I didn't think—I thought—if there were two—it might not kill you."

"Oh, they'd see to that. How would the messages get taken in that case? So promise me you won't."

"I promise. Oh, I do hope"—wildly—"they'll do us first!"

"Do you? How business-like!" He spoke with a flippancy he was very far from feeling, and she strove to imitate his tone.

"Yes, isn't it? Just as if we were going to have our hair cut! But perhaps—— Would that make it worse for you?"

"No," he said slowly—"not worse. I think perhaps it would be better—yes, it would—to know that there was nothing more they could do to you."

He turned and stared resolutely in one direction, and Melifred sat looking with equal determination in the other, biting her lips fiercely. Then Horace looked round and held out his hand, and said, "Melifred?" and without a word she put hers into it. Thus they sat through the long afternoon, hand in hand and silent. Now and then Melifred would bathe Erna's forehead as she lay unconscious between them, or Horace would drive away the flies from her face, but they did not speak. Many things that might have been said, eminently appropriate to the situation, were in Melifred's mind, but she knew that if she opened her mouth to utter them she must cry. And it was hard enough for Horace without that. The occasional convulsive grip of his hand told her as much.

The sun was nearing the tops of the tall trees behind the village on the west when the old headman approached the captives. He came with a grievance which he wished removed. It seemed that Horace's threat of carrying a bad report of the tribe to the spirit-world had produced a wholly unexpected

effect. No previous victim within the memory of the oldest of the elders had ever taken the honour conferred upon him so untowardly. It was not playing the game. Absurd though it seems to the Western mind, the tribe, while still determined upon the sacrifice, were seriously perturbed by Horace's churlish attitude, and the headman had been deputed to reason him into a more complaisant frame of mind. He spoke with the utmost respect and persuasiveness.

"It may be, Tuan, that you are displeased with us for neglecting you, but we thought we should best consult your wishes by leaving you free to do what you chose until the time came. It is true that former victims have been offered their choice of all the pleasures the tribe could afford for a whole day, but they were slaves, and it seemed to us that a Tuan would be different. But if you have any wish that might be gratified between now and sunset, let me entreat you to make it known, and to view us with favour in return."

Horace spoke with careful nonchalance, though his heart was thumping. "The time is too short," he said. "Why should I be put off with less time than a slave? Give me also a whole day."

"Alas, Tuan!" with genuine regret, "there is not time. You see how the tribe has come together"—he looked across at the growing crowds—"and there are things to be done to-night which must follow the sacrifice, not precede it."

"Then let one sacrifice be enough. Let the Mems go, and I will give such an account of the tribe as shall rejoice every spirit that ever belonged to it."

"Why must you ask such impossible things, Tuan?" The headman spoke as one who has stretched every possible point in vain. "There is no man in all the tribes but would accept with pride the honour destined for you if it was accompanied by what I have offered you."

"More fools they!" Horace turned away brusquely. "You know now what's the only thing that will make me give a good account of you. Please yourselves."

The old man went off reluctantly, and Melifred demanded what he wanted, then paused thoughtfully. "They are consulting together," she said, looking after him. "If he comes

back and offers to let one of us escape—either Erna or me—you will let me decide which?"

"Most certainly not!" said Horace hastily. "At least, I don't know. Well, perhaps—yes, I would. I know what it would mean, though."

"I thought you would say yes, if you gave yourself time to think. How could we sacrifice poor Erna when she could not speak for herself?" She smoothed the unconscious girl's fair hair. "And I think—I am sure—she would wish to live. But I shouldn't care about it—without you."

"Oh, all right!" was the unromantic response, but it was accompanied by a hand-grip which made up for the baldness of the words. "But they won't do it," Horace added almost cheerfully. "It would disarrange the whole protection of the house—make it lop-sided, don't you see? Evil spirits would get in by squeezing close to the other doorpost, and there might as well have been no sacrifice at all. Queer things these fellows believe, don't they? I little thought, when old Tarker used to read me his notes on what he had picked up——"

He stopped abruptly, and this time it was Melifred who squeezed his hand. Then they sat silent again, watching the people who were still streaming in. It seemed as if the whole Warribow tribe must be there—each man fully armed and in his battle attire. Suddenly Melifred said, "Horace!"

"Yes?" he looked round eagerly.

"Oh, don't! you'll be disappointed. Did you think I had some splendid idea that might save all our lives?"

"Not a bit of it! It was the way you called me 'Horace' so naturally—showed you were accustomed to do it to yourself."

"Then you *will* be disappointed, for when I call you anything to myself I call you Berringer of Bandeir."

"What a mouthful! And 'when you call me anything'! Do you mean you generally say 'that muff,' or something of the kind?"

"No, it means I call you 'he.' And that means you are the only 'he' in the world, doesn't it? What do you call me?"

"Melifred, of course. I think it's the most beautiful name there is. And would you believe I once thought it ugly?"

"I know—the time when you thought of me as 'that girl'!

I know you did, so you needn't deny it. But I really had something particular to say. What about that talisman, the one the Sakyans gave you? Don't you think it might have some effect on these Warribows?"

"Hardly, I'm afraid. It would probably be beneath their dignity to take any notice of anything belonging to such inferior people. But if we had it here we'd try it, of course—so as to leave no stone unturned."

"But we have got it here, or I shouldn't have asked you. Don't you remember you asked me to take care of it for you?"

"But you don't mean to say you have carried such an awkward heavy thing about with you ever since?"

"Of course. How else could I be sure of taking care of it? I made a little bag for it out of the sleeve part of an evening glove, and Pélagic thinks it is an amulet. I had to wrap it up very carefully, or it would have cut through my pocket. I think it must be some kind of crystal—one edge is so sharp. I believe it would cut through chains for us, if we had them on. But unfortunately—— Here it is."

After a little wriggling, she produced it from her pocket—for ladies had pockets in those days, though they were rather awkwardly situated. Horace looked at the neat little white kid parcel rather helplessly. "But you've sewn it up!" he said.

"Of course. How long do you think Pélagic would have been in turning it out if I hadn't? But haven't you even got a knife?"

"I have nothing but a handkerchief. Aunt Rosamond and Tarker thought of bringing some clothes for me all right, but how could they think of the little things one carries in one's pockets? There now! how one lives and learns!" For Melifred had taken a hairpin from her head, and was attacking the stitches with it.

"It's about the only one I have left," she said; "so if it breaks—— No, there you are!" and she unrolled the stone from the pieces of the glove in which it had been wrapped.

"It *is* like a crystal," said Horace, weighing it in his hand. "Melifred! what if it should turn out to be a diamond?"

"A diamond—that size?"

"It's possible, of course. Not that it makes much difference to us now——"

"Oh, well, we'll pretend it is, and that it will make us rich beyond the dreams of avarice. But aren't you going to impress the headman with it?"

"Presently." In spite of himself, Horace shivered a little as he noted the lengthening shadows. The sun was very near its setting now. "We'll leave them alone as long as they'll leave us alone, and raise the fresh question when they want to get to business. A minute more or less may make all the difference to us—a minute gained, I mean—— Why, Melifred, my dear girl—what's the matter?"

"Horace! you don't mean there's a chance—of our being saved?" She could hardly frame the words.

"A very poor chance, I'm afraid—that's why I said nothing about it. I was afraid it would make it worse if—— Dear, don't give way now. You have been so splendid. And really it is such a very slight chance."

"Tell me about it—what you mean," said Melifred faintly. She was leaning back against the tree, the tears she had held back so strenuously running down her face in spite of all her efforts. "No, I don't want any water. Do tell me, Horace!"

"I hardly dare call it a chance." He was sitting close to her now, and felt the shudders which shook her whole frame. "Don't let yourself dwell on it—it'll only be worse—— And I swear to you I believe if help had been coming it would have come before this. You see, it all depends on whether Salleh escaped from the Warribows who were after him, or not. If he did, he could guide Tarker here—— I sent your old Indian on to the camp after he had come across me in the jungle with Salleh to take care of me——"

"What were you doing?" weakly.

"Well, since you ask, I was trying to get a sight of your side of Falckenheim, to see if you were signalling to me, or anything—a handkerchief, or something of that kind, you know."

"But I hadn't said I would!"

"I know, but you might, you see. I thought I might even see you. Well, I'm sure Tarker would come to the rescue at once as soon as he heard you were in the hands of the Warri-

bows and I was gone in chase, but unfortunately he wouldn't know where to go. He knows there is one village at loggerheads with Falck, because he was talking about it this morning, but he only knew the direction vaguely. And if the headman's messengers have collected all the Warribows within reach, he could get no help from them, though he has made such friends with them that I think they would help him—sacrifice or no sacrifice—if he once got hold of them."

"Then you think it's not much good—hoping?"

"I'm afraid not," reluctantly. "You see, if he had no guide, the obvious thing would be to take the news to Falekenheim. Of course Falck knows where the village is, but the time wasted in finding him, and getting his men together, would probably make all the difference."

"I see," murmured Melifred. "Well, never mind; I won't be silly again. It was just for the moment——" Her lover's lips, seeking hers in the dusk, cut off the end of the sentence.

"Melifred—oh, Melifred—why didn't you fall in love with some fellow that was some good—not a wretched creature that can only sit and do nothing when he would give his very soul to save you? They might cut me up into small pieces if they would only let you go—I don't mind what they do to me—but to know that you——"

"Don't think of it. It will be over in a minute. Oh, my dear, dear boy, if I could only bear yours for you!"

She clung to him, trembling like a leaf, but still resolutely choking back her sobs. "I mustn't cry," she whispered painfully, "because if I once begin I shall never stop. Help me to be brave, Horace. I must be brave. Remember, if we had lived, I should be the wife of Berringer of Bandeir. O God, let me be brave, whatever happens!"

"Melifred, you are breaking my heart!" The words burst from Horace in his agony, and quieted her instantly. She struggled from his embrace, and kissed him once—softly and gently, as a mother might—on the forehead.

"That's over, dear. I am brave now," she said. "Only promise me you won't look—when they take me. You will shut your eyes? Only say to yourself, 'It will be over very quickly,' and pray for me, as I shall pray for you."

The sun had set now, and there was a movement among the thronging tribesmen on the green. "God bless you, Melifred!" said Horace huskily as he stumbled to his feet and helped her up. "You are the bravest——" he stopped suddenly, for a voice came from the recumbent form of Erna at their feet.

"How dark!" it said drowsily. "Is it time to get up?"

"No, not yet," said Melifred, stooping over her. "Go to sleep again. Oh, Horace, it only wanted this!" she breathed as she stood up.

"No; listen," said Horace, for Erna's voice was babbling on low and happily. The gleam of consciousness had been only momentary. The headman and some of the elders were coming towards them, their forms standing out black against the fire which had been lighted in the middle of the green. Horace felt in his pocket for the talisman, and held it in his hand.

"Look!" said Melifred sharply. "Horace, look!"

"Hush! not a word!" he breathed hurriedly. "Don't make the Warribows look round."

For the eyes of all the tribesmen were naturally turned towards the tree beneath which the destined victims stood, and on the other side of the green the leaping flames had illuminated for one moment a sun-helmet and a white face under it, peering out of the shadows. Melifred gripped Horace's arm painfully to keep herself on her feet, her heart thumping wildly.

"Steady!" he said laconically, and in the hope of keeping the attention of the crowd firmly fixed, stepped forward and addressed the approaching tribesmen.

"You refuse to believe I am Datu Berringer's son. See here. I have——" his voice was drowned by a burst of firing, so close at hand and so unexpected that though it came from only two or three rifles, and as a volley was, a sad failure, its effect was tremendous. Some of the nearer Warribows fell, though their bodies showed no wounds, others fled wildly in different directions, and the masses farther off gripped their weapons in shaking hands and stood huddled together terrified. The wearer of the sun-helmet appeared suddenly at Horace's elbow, with a smoking rifle in his hands.

"Pure funk!" he growled. "We fired over their heads, of course."

"Mr Tarker!" cried Melifred. "Oh, and Aunt Rosamond—dear Aunt Rosamond—oh——!"

"Postpone the hysterics, please—just a little while." Mr Tarker's repressive voice had the effect he intended of a douche of cold water. "Bliss, you might relieve your aunt of that rifle. You young idiot, what made you start off on this wild-goose chase all by yourself?"

"But you seem—to have come—all by yourselves." Horace's teeth were chattering as though with cold as he took the rifle from Mrs Tournour-Durell's hands.

"No, the servants are here—don't want these chaps to see how few we are. We had to come all together, bag and baggage, because I wasn't sure it was safe to leave any one behind. Who's this on the ground? Miss Falck—hurt? Well, this finishes everything!"

"We can—carry her easily. She is very light," broke in Melifred, who was squeezing Aunt Rosamond's arm ecstatically, and trying to keep herself from screaming and laughing and crying all at once.

"Can't be done. The jungle is alive with tribesmen to-night. Never knew there were so many in Jhalábor. We must get to the nearest house and hold it—as long as we can, though what good it will be I don't know. And of course it's the person who made all the trouble—— What's that? Pray, sir, who may you be?"

Turning towards the house he indicated, Mr Tarker had come face to face with a large gentleman in a sun-helmet, who stepped forward from the shadows at the moment.

"It seems I haf arrived in the nick of time!" said Mr Falck genially. "Haf no fear, my friend; my party is a larch one and well armed. Do I indeed behold the gracious Mrs Tournour-Durell? Dear lady, now is the opportunity to return the hospitality you haf so kindly afforded to my daughter at Bandeir. And Meess Milly! *and* my yong friend Bliss! This is indeed a happy reunion. But where is my little Erna? So—inchured? Happily our goot Dr Altmann is with me, and will look to her temporarily before we start. Once at Falckenheim, she can be properly attended to."

Mr Falck's rich rolling voice had carried all before it, but now

Mrs Tourneur-Durell succeeded in putting in a word after several vain attempts. "You are most kind, Mr Falck, and I can't say how glad I am you have come up in time to take charge of poor Erna. But we won't trouble you to put us all up. We had just decided"—Mr Tarker concealed a grim smile—"to spend the night here, and go on as early as possible to-morrow. We are in a hurry to get back to Bandeir."

"More haste, worse speed—you know the proverb, gracious lady—so? For your own sakes, it is necessary for you to return with me. Otherwise, in the inflamed state of mind of the Ouaribau, I can't guarantee your safety. What haf you to tell me of my little one, doctor? Concussion, but not severe? So; we will commence our chourney. We haf chairs for the yong ladies, but I fear—— Can you walk, Bliss?"

"Thanks, I am not coming." Horace was weakly inclined to laugh. Could Mr Falck really think he and Melifred would place themselves again in his power, even if the alternative was the mercy of the Warriows? "I think you would find it safer not to take Miss Falck through the jungle to-night, but you are the best judge of that. We shall stay where we are, and go on in the morning."

"You will certainly not stay where you are." Mr Falck shot the words out viciously. "As Administrator of Palbat, it falls to me to ensure your safety, and that I can't do if you stay here. For your own sakes, I must take you with me to Falckenheim. Come, my dear madam"—his tone was silky again as he turned to Mrs Tourneur-Durell—"you won't oblige me to call upon my Ouaribau to coerce you?"

"Have you any Warriows to call upon?" asked Mr Tarker, who had joined the group again, with mild interest.

"What do you mean by that, sir? I haf the armed escort that accompanied me. Tasman——"

"Because——" pursued Mr Tarker dispassionately—"I think you will find they have joined their countrymen, with the rifles you entrusted to them. And if you have not noticed, I have, that there are Mahkyoons here to-night as well as Warriows. It looks to me like a general rising against the whites—as represented by you and your Company. They were all about us as we came along, and I have no doubt they were dogging you too.

I only wonder they have not shot us all down as we talked. We must get into this house over here. The walls will keep off poisoned arrows, at any rate."

"But this is preposterous!" cried Mr Falck. "We will fight our way back. Falckenheim can stand a sieche."

"I am not quite sure that it's there to stand one. There's a curious light in the sky in the direction in which I make out Falckenheim to lie. But that's your look-out. Let me help you, Mrs Tourneur. Bliss, bring Miss Corvin. The servants were to creep up at the back. Now!"

He led the way quickly towards a house standing rather by itself, and not quite so large as the rest. It was only thirty yards or so away, but the distance seemed much greater, for the tribesmen, who had been gathering in threatening masses on the other side of the fire since recovering from their fright, began to press forward with angry murmurs when they saw the movement. Convinced against his will, Mr Falck called to the doctor, and together they lifted Erna and carried her after the rest, anxiously shepherded by Mr Tasman, who in his whole-hearted interest in the conversation, had allowed the Warriow escort, of which he was in charge, to melt away under his very nose.

"Look here," said Horace hastily to Mr Tarker—"if it once comes to a fight, the tribesmen will sweep us off the face of the earth. I'm going to tell them who I am, and try speaking to them."

"Get the ladies into shelter first," was the gruff reply. "And for pity's sake, make up your mind who you're going to be for the future. Put your foot here, please."

Mrs Tourneur-Durell, to whom the order was addressed, obeyed meekly. Happily she had donned a short dress and high boots for her jungle travelling, for in the long and rigorously tied-back skirt of the day she could never have mounted the notched pole which in Warriow eyes represented a ladder. Once at the top, where the servants were anxious to give the help of which mingled fright and excitement made them quite incapable, she turned to steady Erna's head, as her father and Dr Altmann, with immense difficulty, lifted her from notch to notch.

"Reminds me of some picture of a flood," said Horace to Melifred. "Tigers and deer and boa-constrictors and things all

mixed up—friends and enemies together—common danger, don't you know?" He felt curiously shy of her since those moments when they had seen into the depths of each other's souls, and had the impulse, usual in such cases, to say something idiotic and had turn the whole thing off with a laugh. Melifred felt exactly the same, but very naturally resented his doing so.

"At any rate, Aunt Rosamond won't let you be married to Erna against your will," she said cheerfully, and any awkwardness vanished as if by magic.

"I owe you one for that!" said Horace. "Tarker, I want to present you to my future wife."

"How many more?" growled Mr Tarker, who objected to the introduction of such irrelevancies at the moment. "Let us hope it's the right one this time!"

"One for you!" said Melifred to Horace. "And now that I think of it, I never gave you leave to say we were engaged."

He looked at her with righteous rebuke. "And you expect me to believe that you—you—would sit all afternoon holding the hand of a man to whom you were not engaged! Shame upon you, Miss Corvin!"

The tears were in Melifred's eyes again. "Oh, I did, I did!" she whispered, pressing close to him. "I was a wretch to say that!"

"When you two have quite finished talking nonsense," said Mr Tarker pointedly, observing with relief that Erna was safely raised to the verandah, "we can begin to help Miss Corvin up, Bliss."

"You would talk nonsense," said Horace, placing Melifred's foot in the first notch, "if you had just got engaged to a hard-hearted girl who could face death with you for hours without ever letting you see a tear, and make jokes almost to the end."

"If you make me cry now," said Melifred unsteadily, "I shall fall."

"Will you be sensible?" demanded Mr Tarker of Horace. "You seem to forget we are not out of the wood yet, by any manner of means."

"Yes, we are," said Horace. "At least, that's how I feel."

"Oh, you!" grunted Mr Tarker. "Up with you, will you?"

"No," said Horace. "Tasman next," and he let himself down after seeing Melifred to the top, and took Tasman's rifle, turning to face the crowding tribesmen. "Now you, Tarker," he said, without looking round.

"Not a bit of it. I stay to the last," said Mr Tarker angrily.

"No; I stay to the last," said Horace, and to his own surprise Mr Tarker obeyed. When he was safely at the top, Horace slung the rifle on his back and followed him. Erna had been carried into the house itself, but Mr Falck, on the broad verandah, was busy organising a defence.

"Six rifles?" he said. "Haf we no more? This place is too larch to be held by so few."

"Especially as the tribesmen have rifles as well," agreed Mr Tarker, disliking, as any Englishman would, to see a foreigner taking the lead in a company mainly British. "And I presume they have been taught to use them?"

"There is no need to alarm the ladies further, sir," said Mr Falck, with dignity. "From your experience of these tribes, should you say they are more likely to attack us in front or behind?"

"Considering their numbers, I should say all round. And at the same time, a few of them will be crawling in to set light to the house underneath."

"We could fire through the floor," murmured Mr Falck, but his voice shook. "Chentlemen," he said with emotion, "I fear the position is desperate. We haf a responsibility that should nerfe our hearts. Haf any of you a suggestion to make? I will gladly consider it."

"I have no suggestion exactly," said Horace; "but I am going out to the tribesmen, to speak to them."

"Indeed? But I imachined we had only chust saved you from death at their hands. Is it wise to appeal to them immediately in the character of a rescued victim?"

"I shan't. I shall speak to them"—his eyes sought Melifred's—"as Berringer of Bandeir."

Mr Falck bowed. "I salute you, Mr Berrincher. Yet you haf no standing in Palbat."

"That remains to be seen. I believe there are a good many of my own people here. At least I can but try."

"Consider, Berringer," said Mr Tarker; "you are staking life and everything on one throw."

"And if I am, it's worth it. What good shall I ever do in Bandeir if I shirk this chance?"

"Horace, my dear boy, you have no need to prove yourself to us now," urged his aunt. "You have won your spurs. Don't take this risk out of bravado."

"I don't—honestly. I want to save our lives—and the tribesmen's lives too—and to do it at the risk of one instead of all. And if everybody else wants to hold me back, I know one who won't," and again his eyes sought Melifred's.

"No-o—," she responded desperately, "I won't hold you back. But I'll never forgive you if—you get killed."

"Joking to the very end this time!" said Horace gravely. "No, I won't say good-bye." He stepped just inside the doorway with her. "It would be an insult to you to tell you to be brave. You are. But think of all these poor people that my father loved. I don't want us to have to kill one of them. They are my people too, you know—and yours. And you said—you promised——"

"I know. Yes, I shall be praying that they may listen to you," she said quickly, and they kissed one another.

"Look here, Berringer," said Mr Tarker, "I'm coming with you. You only know the Thakip dialect, and a word wrong may ruin you in a case like this."

"And I also am coming," said Mr Falck. "I cannot permit questions affecting my territory to be discussed without my presence. It is the one that is away who suffers."

"By all means come to the edge of the verandah, both of you," said Horace; "but not a step further," and he went forward to the head of the ladder.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PRICE OF PALBAT.

As Horace stood looking down at them in the light thrown by the great fire, there was again a movement among the crowding tribesmen—not a movement of hostility, but almost, it might be imagined, of relief, as though they were glad the initiative should be taken out of their hands.

"May your fields be fruitful!" he called out.

There was a moment's pause, as though those below had difficulty in finding the right response. Then a burly fellow, armed to the teeth, stood forward. "May you enjoy cool weather to-morrow, Tuan! I am Mat Ali, chief of the Warri-bows. Who are you?"

"The Tungku Muda of Bandeir, son of Datu Berringer." A gasp, almost a sigh, passed through the throng.

Mat Ali came a little closer. "Tuan, we would fain believe what you say. Yet we have only your word for it, and we have heard from one and another that hitherto you have been called Tuan Balisi, son to no man of whom we have any knowledge."

"It is true," said Horace, "and I can give you no proof but my own word, and that of those with me." Then he carried the war into the enemy's camp. "Desiring to see the temper of the tribes, I came among them under another name. The Warri-bows would have sacrificed me to the spirits, my own Mahkyoons drove me from village to village without even letting me speak. Only the Sakyans recognised and received me, and there are none of them here."

"Tuan, I am here!" Swelling with importance, the Sakyan chief stepped out of the dusky crowd. "Mine was the house

you honoured by sojourning in it for many days. From our hands you accepted the proof of your descent. Tuan, have you still the gift you received from the hands of the old woman my mother?"

"Most certainly." Horace took the talisman from his pocket, and held it up dramatically for the contemplation of the multitude, though how it could possibly prove his claim was a mystery to the Western mind. Behind him Mr Falck gave a gasp and leaned forward eagerly. The Sakyan chief turned with pride to the assembly.

"What did I tell you?" he said. "And you—both of you—would have killed our young Datu. *We* saved him."

"Tuan," said Mat Ali, "the heads of every man, woman, and child in this village—though the headman is my own wife's father—shall be laid before you in the twinkling of an eye, if you will accept the expiation."

"Where is the chief of the Mahkyoons?" said Horace. "He will know whether Datu Berringer's son can accept such an atonement."

A depressed-looking tribesman stepped into unwilling prominence. "Tuan, I am Mat Hassan, chief of the Mahkyoons. What can I say? We know too well that no amends we can offer would commend themselves to you. We can only plead that we were led astray by one who has already been punished for his deeds, and another who will be."

"It is well," said Horace, quite unconscious of the nature of the "punishment" meted out to Sah. "Both Mahkyoons and Warrihows erred in ignorance. Yet let them remember that the Sakyans whom they despise saw more clearly than they. And now shall I be welcome if I come down and talk with you?"

A great roar of response went up. "Come down to us, Tuan; come down! Now indeed we know that you are Datu Brinja's son."

One reassuring glance Horace sent to Melifred as he turned to descend the pole, and another—a repressive one this time—to Mr Falck, who seemed anxious to follow him, and then he stood unarmed amid the hosts of tribesmen. Their swords and shields and blowpipes thrust hastily into the hands of the men nearest

them, the chiefs of the Warribows and the Mahkyoons stepped forward and escorted him to the middle of the green, whither a panting slave had already hurried with a string stool reft from the nearest house, and the assembly was constituted in due form. Horace might be tingling with impatience, but he knew that not for all the anxiety of those he had left must he try to hasten matters. The situation was still obscure, and it could only be cleared up by allowing the tribesmen absolute licence to explain things in their own way. He took his seat, Mat Ali and Mat Hassan sat down on either hand as close to him as they could manage to get, and the Sakyan chief, determined to maintain his advantage, settled himself immediately behind him. This was a triumph of prudence rather than humility, for the superior tribes would certainly have denied him a place nearer than one of the horns of the crescent formed by the two long lines of minor chiefs and leading men stretching to left and right, and he felt it wise to be where he was sure of protection. For this was a council of war, since the usual trays of food and huge cheroots were not handed round. Horace waited in patience until every man who had a right to sit down was seated to the satisfaction of his neighbours, if not his own, and then spoke.

"Why have my Mahkyoons crossed their boundaries and mine, and joined the Warribows in warlike array?"

"Tuan," was Mat Hassan's unexpected answer, "we are here to serve you, because we heard you were in danger."

"From the Warribows?" asked Horace, puzzled. It was Mat Ali's turn to surprise him.

"Never, Tuan! To-day's mischance springs solely from the foolishness of the people of this village, for which they are notorious in the tribe. It was the report of your danger from your enemies here and in Bandeir that for the first time linked together the Warribows and the Mahkyoons. We are your Warribows, even as the Mahkyoons are yours."

This was an assertion with which Mr Falck, if he understood it, could hardly be expected to agree, and Horace thought it best to ignore it for the present, as well as the mysterious allusion to enemies in Bandeir itself. He couched his reply as carefully as Mr Tarker could have wished. "For all you have done to save my friends and me from danger my gratitude and

that of Bandeir will always be yours." He flattered himself that his language was at least as equivocal as the services rendered by the Warribows. "But now let me hear how the danger came to your ears, and why both tribes acknowledge me now when they rejected me before?"

Clearly he was showing a lack of taste in thus pressing disagreeable questions, for Mat Ali looked across him at Mat Hassan, who appeared equally reluctant to speak. As Horace waited, however, looking with bland enquiry at each in turn, the Mahkyoon chief evidently resolved to make a clean breast of things and get it over.

"Blame us not, Tuan, but rather blame those your enemies whose lies have led us astray. The trouble began when we heard of the terror which has fallen upon all Bandeir by reason of the head-hunters."

"But I thought it was the Mahkyoons who were head-hunters!" said Horace.

"In the old days, Tuan"—reproachfully—"but not since Datu Brinja took us for his men. Our hearts melted within us when we heard what was happening. The man Sah brought us the news. He had grievously wronged the tribe and fled from it, but he offered to make atonement for his guilt, and we received him. Word had already come to us that all men in Bandeir went in fear of their lives because of the head-hunters, but it was he who told us that the heads were all required by Tuan Pitah"—Horace jumped—"for building into his white pathway. Then he told us also what had been told him secretly, that Tuan Pitah had need of three Mahkyoon children for sacrifice to the spirits on the completion of the pathway, and that he was sending the young Tuan Balisi to secure them for him. We would have laid the matter before our own Tuan Warcopi, but he was sick and could not understand our words, and his deputy is a youth of little wisdom, so we had to protect ourselves. Yet because we honour all Tuans for the sake of Datu Brinja, we made known to Sah that as he had brought word of the danger, so he must remove it—thus staking his own life against that of Tuan Balisi." Horace nodded grave appreciation of the delicate point involved, and tried to look becomingly grateful. "You know, Tuan, how you came among us with Tuan Berendi. His

errand we knew—he was to watch over Tuan Warcopi in his sickness—but you came for no reason that we could see, and how could we but believe the words of Sah? Yet we gave you what warning we could by offering you no welcome, but you did not turn back. Then word came, and was passed from village to village, that Tuan Balisi had been wounded by Sah, but was not dead. Yet he must die shortly, for the poison was in his blood. But that no village should incur the guilt of his death, all united to drive him on, beyond the territory of the tribe, in the hope that his master might accept him as a sacrifice instead of the victims he had failed to provide. That, Tuan, is the reason for what befell you, for which we have no words to ask pardon. We were deceived.”

He groaned, and the Mahkyoons sitting near and standing round groaned also, with genuine remorse. The Warribows did their best to combine sympathy with reprobation in their expression of face, and the Sakyan chief swelled with pride. Horace gave judgment in measured tones.

“I am glad to have heard this, for now I understand that the hearts of my Mahkyoons have not turned against me, as I feared. They were deceived; let them beware of deceivers in future. It is for them to earn the pardon I am ready to bestow by returning to their old fidelity and obedience. Let me hear how their eyes were opened.”

Somewhat cheered, Mat Hassan ventured to take Horace's hand and pass it over his face. A sigh of relief from his warriors welcomed the favour, and he went on.

“Our hearts were troubled by what we had done, Tuan, even before we knew the truth—nay, the man Sah himself was fearful because the spirits had turned away his arrow, so that the wound was not fatal. Then came Tuan Tarrikah—and our own Tuan Warcopi when he recovered—asking us all whether we had seen Tuan Balisi, and seeking to discover what had happened to him. But because we were afraid, we kept silence, or gave them lying answers. Yet we took Sah, and fastened him down in the jungle to die the jungle death, that we might be held guiltless should the Tuans discover what had befallen Tuan Balisi. And then, Tuan, while Sah was dying, there came by that place Tuan Berendi, and he cried out to him to justify him

by assuring us of the truth of all he had told us. But Tuan Berendi laughed, and said he could well believe Sah had brought about the death of Tuan Balisi for some private grudge, and fully deserved his punishment. And when he had gone on, Sah told us, in cursing him, that he now believed what he had suspected before, that it was Tuan Berendi who was the man charged with stealing the children for sacrifice, and that he had laid the blame falsely on Tuan Balisi, so that we had driven the innocent to his death and let the guilty go free. After that, Tuan, there came to us as suppliants this man"—he indicated the smiling Sakyan chief, who did not appear to be considered worthy of a name—"and the remnant of his people, and revealed to us that Tuan Balisi was not dead, but had been succoured by them, and that he was not Tuan Balisi at all, but our own young lord, Datu Brinja's son. But now he had fallen into the hands of his enemy, the Tuan Kaya, and they feared he would be slain. Tuan, we have erred grievously, but at least we did our utmost to save you when we heard that—laying aside for your sake the enmity that has always reigned between us and the Warribows. For knowing that they would not willingly harm Datu Brinja's son, but might be led to do so by guile, as we ourselves had been, and knowing also that the Tuan Kaya had of late been showing himself their enemy also, we sent ambassadors to them—this man among them—and proposed an alliance. Thus it is, Tuan, that you are happily in the midst of us to-night."

"And yet the Warribows would have killed me!" Horace's voice fell coldly on the burst of applause from both tribes which greeted this conclusion. His words sounded tactless, he knew, but the matter had to be threshed out, or he might never get at the rights of it. The Warribow chief responded to the challenge.

"Alas, Tuan! so many strange things have been happening that the marvel is you should be alive. For there are certain of my young men to whom I gave leave to serve the Tuan Kaya, headed by one who called himself my brother"—he indicated an unprepossessing-looking youth among those who stood opposite—"and these the Tuan Kaya armed—to guard him, as he said, but his true thought was to incite the man Usop to set

himself up against me. Therefore they were not admitted to our plans for rescuing you, though we might have had to tell them had not Tuan Tarrikah come among us and told us that he would find a way to bring you out safely. Usop and his company were commanded to kill you should they see you escaping, and they did find a man escaping, and slay him, but it was not you." Horace listened in bewilderment. This was the first he had heard of the fate of the unfortunate Spaniard. "You were safe in Tuan Tarrikah's camp, where we could watch over you. How could we tell that you would wander in this direction, where no man knew who you were, when our minds were set upon protecting you from Tuan Tarrikah?"

Horace felt that he needed to take his head in both hands, and think out this fresh complication, but there was no time. "Will you tell me," he asked helplessly, "why you thought I needed protection against Tuan Tarker, who is my friend, and had just helped me to escape from the Tuan Kaya?"

"Surely you jest, Tuan. Because he is the servant of Tuan Pitah, of course."

"But Tuan Peter is my uncle, and has shown me nothing but kindness."

"Tuan!" was the non-committal reply, but Horace knew perfectly well that it meant, "You may choose not to unfold your family scandals to us, but we know all about them." He was almost falling from his seat with weariness, but he braced himself afresh.

"Tell me what you think Tuan Peter has done."

"It is not what we think, Tuan, but what you think. Did you not return to Bandeir in disguise, showing that Tuan Pitah, who had already seized your inheritance, would kill you if he found you? And is not Tuan Pitah building to shut you out from your father's town his white pathway, which you cannot cross because he has bribed the spirits by building into it the heads of many men? And did he not deceive the man Sah into spreading the false tale which so nearly led to your death? And is not his Mem here with Tuan Tarrikah to make sure that even if you escaped from the Tuan Kaya, you should never reach Bandeir?"

To Horace as he listened the wonder was that not only he,

but any member of the party, was still alive. He collected himself and spoke slowly and impressively. "Listen all of you," he said. "Tuan Peter is my mother's brother, who has ruled for me faithfully all these years, and his Mem I regard as only second to my mother. Any injury done to either of them is an injury done to me, and the same with Tuan Tarker. Is that understood?"

"Tuan!" replied a submissive chorus.

"It was my people that I doubted, not Tuan Peter, when I came to Bandeir under another name. I had been absent so long that I feared they might not receive me. But what was Tuan Peter doing? He was building a beautiful white pathway in my honour, that I might have a fitting spot on which to set foot when I landed. And you accuse him of seeking to shut me out!"

"But the heads, Tuan, and the bodies of the children?" asked the Mahkyoon chief anxiously. "Though had we known the pathway was for our Datu, we would not have held back had you asked for thirty children instead of three—nor will we now."

Horace looked at him sternly. "Do you say that to the son of Datu Berringer, who ordained that there should be no head-hunting, no human sacrifice, throughout Bandeir? There are no heads buried in Tuan Peter's pathway, no children to be sacrificed when it is finished. I myself could not hate such things more than he does. How dare you utter such tales concerning him?"

"But, Tuan"—the Warriow chief came to his colleague's rescue—"all white men are not like you, and we were deceived about Tuan Pitah, so it is not our fault, but the Tuan Kaya's. He is not of your tribe, and he has permitted us to take heads while fighting for him, nor has there been any prohibition of sacrifice—save the sacrifice of fowls. But we like your tribe best, and when we have killed him and all that belong to him we will be your men and keep your law—sacrificing fowls and not maidens."

"But there must be no killing," said Horace, startled. "Palbat belongs to the Tuan Kaya just as Bandeir belongs to me, and I cannot take it from him."

"You need know nothing of it, Tuan—" reassuringly. "The man and his daughters and all his servants will be dead, and Palbat will be yours."

"Not his daughters, I hope," said Horace, forcing a smile, "since one of them is to be my wife."

Blank dismay overspread all the countenances round him, and Mat Hassan offered a grave remonstrance.

"You are young, Tuan, and young men do not look beyond the pleasure of the moment. We who have lived longer know the danger of a chief's seeking a bride from an inferior tribe, for she and her people will drag him down till he is like themselves."

"I forgot to say"—Horace's heart was thumping, for the tribes had at command such drastic measures for preventing what seemed to them a misalliance—"that the dark Mem, who is betrothed to me, belongs not to the Tuan Kaya's tribe, but to mine, and has merely been brought up with his daughter, the fair Mem."

The anxious faces cleared as though by magic, for in all the tribes the custom of adopting the children of slain enemies was frequent. "That is well, Tuan. We should have known you were not as other young men. You will marry the dark Mem, and she will bring you the wealth of the Tuan Kaya as her inheritance."

"The Tuan Kaya will keep his own wealth," said Horace sharply. "Whether he remains here, or consents to depart, not a hand is to be laid on him or his." He had a curious feeling that behind him some one was listening with quickened breath, and surmised that Mr Falck had found it impossible to remain patiently on the verandah when the council lasted so long. All the same, Horace wished heartily that he had stayed there, for he foresaw a hard tussle for his life, and the Gordian knot could so easily be cut by a blow dealt in a crowd, not to be brought home to any one. But no doubt Mr Falck thought he had a paramount interest in what was going on. Warribows and Mahkyoons alike were thunderstruck.

"Tuan," said Mat Ali, "it is of the Tuan Kaya we are speaking—the man who through his servant, Tuan Berendi, plotted your death with lies. We also have a score against him, for he has stirred up my brother to seek to put himself in my place. We

came here armed to save you and restore you to your land. You tell us you have no enemies in Bandeir, but only here. So be it; we are going to root them out. We have burnt the Tuan Kaya's village—all save one house where some of his servants are defending themselves, but they cannot hold out long. We shall soon burn them out."

Falckenheim destroyed! Horace had a vague recollection that Mr Tarker had hinted at something of the kind, but it had not impressed itself upon him. "Burnt the Tuan Kaya's village!" he said incredulously. "But he has many servants with guns!"

"Ah, Tuan, a gun has eyes only in front. We were cunning, and came upon the place from behind."

"Shall I tell you, Tuan?" said the Sakyan chief in his ear. "It was our land that the Warribows gave to the Tuan Kaya to build his village on—as I told you when you were with us. But I and my people knew what neither the Tuan Kaya nor the Warribows knew, that there was a secret way under the falling water by which a path up the hill might be reached, and that I showed to Mat Ali to-day. So we came upon the foreign village unawares, and destroyed it."

Certainly Mr Falck seemed doomed to eat the fruit of his own devices! Curious that Melifred should have hit upon the secret path of the Sakyans! Horace became conscious that his thoughts were wandering when he heard Mat Ali say triumphantly, "They were all asleep, for it was noon, and we chased them out into the jungle, all save the white men who took refuge in the strong house. But till we have dealt with the Tuan Kaya and his daughter we need not trouble ourselves about them. Do not fear, Tuan; you shall know nothing of what befalls them."

"Nothing will befall them," said Horace. "The Tuan Kaya and his daughter and their servants will all go free."

"Of course, of course, Tuan!" soothingly. "You yourself shall see it."

"They will go back to Bandeir with me"—firmly—"and thence go where they please. I have said it."

"But, Tuan, that cannot be. They must die."

"They shall not. White man does not kill white."

"But the Tuan Kaya has tried to kill you, Tuan!"

"His tribe may do such things. Mine do not."

"But they should be punished according to their deeds, Tuan," argued Mat Ali painstakingly. "Otherwise they might kill you and not suffer for it."

"I can't help that. Happily they haven't. But if I let them be killed I should be as bad as they are." Horace looked round at the startled and indignant faces. "If they die, I die too. If I live, they belong to me."

"But, Tuan, are we never to be rid of this man?" It was the Sakyan chief who asked the question pathetically. "He has destroyed our villages and set the Warribows to drive us out, and now when we think we shall all dwell in peace under your shadow, you tell us he is not to be slain. But if he lives he will plot against you as before."

"The man cannot stay here," said Mat Ali peremptorily. "But you need have nothing to do with his punishment, Tuan, since you prefer to forgive him. We will settle our own debts, and join ourselves to Bandeir afterwards."

"Indeed, Tuan," said Mat Hassan seriously, "you will be well advised to leave this man to what he deserves. We who were Datu Brinja's men all know that your father was wont to listen to reason, and would discuss matters with the tribes for many days that all might be satisfied with his decisions. But you say, 'This must not be,' 'That shall be as I command,' and give no good reason for it."

Horace felt rather like Rehoboam, save that he could not plead guilty to the implied charge of issuing orders without hearing what the other side had to say. The tribes might be ready to carry on discussions lasting for many days, but the present sitting had nearly brought him to the end of his strength, and if he once yielded to the dreadful fatigue that was gripping him, there would be no further need to concern himself about Mr Falck's fate when he awoke. He tried to infuse into his tired voice a just admixture of firmness and conciliation.

"You mistake me. I would not leave the Tuan Kaya here. Both for his own sake and that of Palbat he must depart, and also because he has plotted against Bandeir and me. But I must buy his rights from him with money, and when he has taken it, he dare show his face here no more."

"Our Tuan is also a Tuan Kaya!" said an old man sitting next to Mat Hassan, in a rich rolling voice of satisfaction that implied a lively sense of favours to come. The chiefs were silent, evidently weighing the new proposal on its merits—with a distinct bias in favour of their own way of settling the difficulty. Presently Mat Ali put his thought into words.

"If our Datu is so rich, why should he waste his goods on this man instead of giving gifts to us?" he enquired pertinently.

Horace sighed. "I am not rich," he said—"any more than my father was. To buy the Tuan Kaya's rights from him will keep me a poor man all my life, but I will do it, because it is the only thing to do."

A sort of incredulous scorn held the chiefs silent a moment before they began to point out with one voice that it was by no means the only—or even the obvious—thing to do, since their plan extinguished all adverse claims without a particle of expense. Their arguments were so loud, so determined, and so menacing, that Horace felt desperately that if he closed his eyes for a moment Mr Falck and Erna would be massacred before he could open them again. His hunted look stirred to unwonted pity the heart of the Sakyan chief, and incidentally provided him with the proudest moment of his life. Stretching out a hand over Horace's shoulder, he dropped on his knee a bag of closely-woven grass.

"Open it, Tuan!" he said. "Show these loud talkers that you are indeed the Tuan Kaya. Now are you richer in these stones which Tuans love than any Tuan that has ever set foot in Jhalabor."

The loud murmurs of the Warribows and Mahkyoons showed that they considered both the intervention and the manner of it wholly uncalled-for, but Horace was hardly conscious of them as he opened the bag, and shook out a dozen or so of stones like the talisman—hard, heavy, sharp where an edge was exposed, soapy to the touch—some larger and some smaller. Was it possible that these dull objects could actually be diamonds?

An excited voice spoke over his shoulder.

"Mr Berrincher, let me remind you that by the terms of my concession those diamonds belong to me!"

Such was the eagerness in Mr Falck's voice that Horace

involuntarily gathered the stones together and guarded them with his hand. One attempt to snatch them, and the German's fate would be sealed, but not even the imminent peril in which he stood could induce him to waive his claim to such a potentiality of wealth. But another voice spoke.

"Pardon me, sir," said Mr Tarker. "That depends entirely upon where they were found. Where did you get these stones?" he asked of the Sakyan chief.

"From a hole in the rock under the river where it falls down the hill, Tuan." A sound of triumph came from Mr Falck, and Horace's heart sank lower than he could have imagined possible after so brief an experience of the possession of wealth.

"Very curious!" commented Mr Tarker. "I never heard of diamonds being found in Palbat before. How did you come to look for them there?"

"Because I put them there, Tuan. I knew that white men prize these things very highly, and when the Tuan Kaya took possession of the lands of our tribe, I hid this bag with the shining stones where he could never find it. To-day I took it out of the hole again. Our Datu will tell you that the bag is soaked with water."

"Yes, indeed—quite sodden. I wonder it held together," said Horace, passing the bag to Mr Tarker. Hope was rising again, for it was evident his former chief was on the track of some happy idea, though what it was he could not guess.

"I see. And did the stones come from this river, or where?" went on Mr Tarker indifferently.

"Nay, Tuan. Such things are not found in Palbat."

"Then where did you find them?"

The Sakyan chief appeared to be embarrassed. "We did not find them, Tuan. We took them from the body of the tailed one [Chinaman]." His tone was shamefaced.

"What tailed one?" sharply.

"Indeed, Tuan, I know not. It was many years ago; I was but a young child. The tailed one was all alone in the jungle. He seemed afraid, as though he feared pursuit—but he did not know the Sakyans were stalking him on either side of the path. He came to the village, and was kindly received, but he would not stay more than one night. He might have departed in safety,

had he not sought to steal away before dawn, as though he expected to be detained against his will. He was captured and brought back, and confessed that he came from Bandeir, and was carrying a store of shining stones which his people had found while working for Datu Brinja, and had hidden unperceived——”

“Ah!” said Mr Tarker. “Every diamond above a certain weight goes to the government, you know, Berringer? No doubt this chap was smuggling away all the big ones that his friends had managed to steal and hide for years. Meant to sell some in Jhalábor, I suppose, and escape with the rest to the Dutch Islands—or even Singapore.”

Horace nodded. “He didn’t get very far, evidently. So you kept the shining stones?” he asked the chief, who was listening anxiously to the English sentences.

“Of course, Tuan!” beamingly, “When we had made the tailed one confess, we killed him.”

“And kept his head?” Horace had an inspiration. “And you put two of the diamonds where the eyes should have been?”

“Only very small ones, Tuan. We thought the tailed one had been so fond of the stones that it would please the spirit in the head to have two of them there and one in the mouth. The one from the mouth you have had already, and the others you shall have if you desire.”

“No, no; let them stay where they are!” said Horace hastily. “I don’t want them.”

“So my mother said, Tuan. From the beginning she urged my father to send to Bandeir and deliver up the stones to Datu Brinja, but news came that he was dead, and we did not know he had left a son. So we kept the stones, but when we were driven out we carried with us only the three that were in the head, placing the rest in safety. And when Datu Brinja’s son came among us, the spirits bade my mother tell us to give him all but the two eye-stones. The mouth-stone—the talisman of the tribe—you received when you left us, Tuan; the others I have delivered to you now—all but those with which the spirit sees.”

Horace was conscious of distinct pleasure that he had not known where the talisman came from when he received it. “Well, this seems to make it clear that the diamonds belong to

me, or rather to the Bandeir government," he said, turning round to Mr Falck.

"By no means!" was the quick rejoinder. "The man's story is palpably false. He has discovered a diamond-field, and tells this tale in the hope of not having to show it." Mr Tarker made a curious sound—between a grim chuckle and a hoot. Horace spoke very deliberately.

"It is not for me to judge whether you believe that or not, Mr Falck. I offer you these diamonds in exchange for the entire rights of your Company over Palbat. If you accept, the diamonds shall be handed over to you at Singapore in return for a properly executed transfer. If you refuse, I regret I cannot charge myself further with your safety. Miss Falck will of course accompany my aunt and my *fiancée* to Bandeir."

"At the mouth of the *sumpitun*, you ask me to purchase my life with the surrender of my rights!" said Mr Falck bitterly.

"On the contrary, I am bribing you to save your life," said Horace. "Do you accept?"

"What else can I do? I am helpless in your hands. Some day, Mr Berringer, you may regret taking this monstrous advantage of one who had showed you no little kindness."

"I will run the risk," said Horace, gathering the stones together with hands that trembled. He was almost spent, and Mr Tarker saw it.

"You young fool!" he grumbled good-naturedly, bending towards Horace as though to help put the stones in the bag again. "Why didn't you make him give up the concession in return for a safe-conduct to the coast—eh? He must have done it. Most absurd piece of quixotism I ever heard of—Berringer-fashion all over! But you may as well announce it to the tribesmen."

And thus prompted, Horace proclaimed as loudly as he could that Palbat had passed for ever from under the domination of the Tuan Kaya, and was henceforth united with Bandeir.

CHAPTER XXV.

REPAID IN KIND.

THE announcement Horace had made as to the future of Palbat left out of sight the shadowy suzerain rights claimed by the Dutch, but as these were unknown to the tribes, the fact did not trouble them. At the moment their minds were filled with something very different and much more important to themselves. The smug complacency of the Sakyan chief, his air—no less irritating because justified—of having supplied the sinews of war and enabled the whole incident to be closed with credit, was infuriating to Mahkyoons and Warribows alike, and there were symptoms to Mr Tarker's experienced eye of a unanimous determination to celebrate their union under Berringer rule by hastily but thoroughly wiping out the contemptible race that dwelt between them. There was no time to give the cue to Horace, even if he had been in a condition to take it, and Mr Tarker, standing beside him, spoke uninvited.

"By permission of the Datu, I have a word to say." Horace looked up in surprise, and nodded feebly. "You all know me by repute, as one who talks with the old men and hears their tales of when their grandfathers were young." Loud assent from the assemblage. "Now by this means I have learnt something that it behoves the tribes to know. Any of you would tell me, did I ask, that the separation between Warribows and Mahkyoons arose because their respective ancestors, the two sons of a great chief, each accused the other of a shameful deed that had been committed. I have discovered that both of them were mistaken. It was their cousin, the ancestor of the Sakyans,

who did the deed." Wild yells of vengeance, directed at the Sakyan chief, who still smiled, but in sickly wise, as he held tightly to Horace's sleeve. "That is the real reason why the Sakyans have been outcasts so long. But in these last days they have purged their crime." Murmurs of disappointment, by no means subdued. "Yes, I say—and more than purged it. But for them, Datu Brinja's son must have died alone in the jungle, driven out by the Mahkyoons, unhelpt by the Warribows. The Sakyans alone recognised him, took him into their village, shared their food with him, tended him in his weakness. It is to the Sakyans he owes his life, and it is his will that from henceforth the life of a Sakyan is to be to all loyal tribesmen as precious as his own. He himself will restore the Sakyans to their lands, and appoint them their boundaries, and to mark his favour, will permit the Mahkyoons and the Warribows to join in building them a new village, in which he will stay for a night. Is this understood?"

"Tuan!" was the submissive reply. The superior tribes might be boiling with indignation, but the Sakyans were safe at their hands henceforward. The Sakyan chief, grinning from ear to ear, knew it too.

"What have we done to deserve such honour, Tuan?" he murmured. "We have nothing that is not yours."

"But you have given me even your talisman!" said Horace.

"Ah, Tuan, but you left us one in exchange. The women found it in your garments when you were sick." He held out proudly an old and disreputable tooth-brush, which Horace recognised as the one he had thrust into his pocket before escaping from the burning rest-house, and did not remember seeing since. Now it had gained a new dignity. He laughed weakly as Mr Tarker helped him—or rather, hoisted him by main force—up the ladder of the commandeered house.

"I can't help thinking of some future explorer coming upon that tooth-brush in your model Sakyan village, and being expected to reverence it as a relic of the famous Datu Brinja the second," he explained.

"Well, don't think, then," said Mr Tarker severely. "You're hysterical. Here, I'll give you into better hands than mine to be looked after. Miss Corvin will need to keep a tight hand

over you—chucking away the diamonds that ought to have made her a necklace!”

“Oh, then they were diamonds!” said Melifred. “We wondered what was in that bag. But I thought I saw him gathering them up.”

“I spoke metaphorically,” said Mr Tarker. “As a matter of fact, he has bought Palbat with them.”

“But what could he do better?” demanded Melifred indignantly.

“When he could have got it for nothing? Why fling them all away, pray? Why not haggle, at any rate?”

“I don’t know. I expect I was too tired,” admitted Horace. “Somehow I knew he would not be able to resist such an offer, and I had a sort of impulse to do the thing really well. He can never say he was ill-used over the affair now.”

“That’s the grand, unpractical, Berringer way of doing things!” said Mr Tarker to Melifred with obvious pride. “Well, well——”

“Hush, please,” said Mrs Tournour-Durell warningly. “I think Miss Falck is coming to her senses at last. She has tried to speak once or twice. Stand here, please, Mr Falck, where she can see you when she wakes, and speak to her before she can remember.”

It was Melifred who turned pale and clutched at Horace’s arm at the recollection of the scene on which Erna’s eyes had closed, for Mr Falck turned the course of his daughter’s thoughts deftly and obediently.

“Wake up, my little one; I have good news for thee. This country thou hatest—we leave it together. Thy father has lost all the fruits of his labours, but at least he can please thee in this.”

“Together?” said Erna apprehensively. “But Milly too?”

“Mecss Milly remains in Bandeir, I understand,” said Mr Falck. “Thou and I wander forth alone.”

“Well, I won’t marry that Brand.” Erna was not quite in command of her senses yet, and her usual awe of her father was in abeyance.

“Thou shalt marry no one that is not thy free choice.”

“Oh, very well!” said Erna grudgingly. “Because, rather than that, I would stay in Bandeir too.”

"By the bye, where is Brand?" asked Horace, with a natural curiosity. Mr Falck looked round.

"The brave youth is gone on a heroic errand," he said. "When I realised this morning the danger of our position here, I despatched him to Bandeir to summon help."

From Mr Falck's point of view, it may have been just possible to describe Brand's errand to Bandeir as an expedition in search of help, but none of the other persons concerned would have been in the least likely to call it so. To Brand himself, at the time he started, the very idea that Mr Falck—not his opponents—should be in need of help would have been ridiculous. It is true that a tearful and terrified Pélagie had just brought the news that on returning to her duties after receiving Mr Falck's tremendous rebuke she had found both of the young ladies missing, and could not discover them anywhere, but no more alarming explanation suggested itself to the bereaved father than that Melifred had managed to slip away and join Mrs Tourneur-Durell, and that Erna, frightened by his threat of the night before, had insisted on accompanying her. His busy brain saw at once a possible advantage to himself, and Brand was under no illusions whatever when he received his employer's orders to start instantly for Bandeir, and announce that Horace had been murdered by the Mahkyoons—adding, wherever a suitable opportunity presented itself, that the person responsible for the deed was undoubtedly Peter Tourneur. As a candidate for Erna's hand, Brand knew himself to be merely a last and rather distasteful resort. Far rather would Mr Falck secure for her the crown matrimonial—so to speak—of Bandeir by marrying her to Horace, regardless of the kind intentions he had expressed with regard to Brand. It was clear that he had it in his mind to accuse Horace of renewing his assault on Erna's heart while under her father's roof, and inciting her to run away and join him. If he could be cajoled or intimidated into marrying her, his life would be safe, and Mr Falck would descend upon Bandeir not only as the ruler's father-in-law, but with the added prestige of having rescued him from such imminent peril that circumstantial reports of his death had already got about. If he refused, events would take their course as previously

arranged, and Mr Falck, having set Mahkyoons and Warribows at each other's throats, and brought about the removal of Mat Ali in favour of Mat Usop, would present himself to Bandeir as the avenger of Datu Brinja's son. Refusal was hardly likely, Brand felt; and he would rather like to be present at the crucial interview, and note his employer's methods—whether he would confront Horace baldly with the choice between marrying Erna and being massacred with his party, or disguise the brutal truth with decent veils. He had no thought of a third alternative, for in his ignorance of the extent to which disaffection had spread among the Warribows, and of Mr Tarker's exploitation of it by means of the hunter Salleh, it did not occur to him that Horace might meet the threat with a successful defiance. No, he would act like a sensible man and accept Erna, and with her her father's tutelage for himself and Bandeir—a tutelage which would be satisfactorily complete if Brand's share of the plot matured as it was intended, and Peter Tournour was safely put out of the way, in the belief that he had brought about his nephew's death, before that nephew could be known to be alive.

Brand was no sentimentalist, and the sigh he gave to the memory of the rosy visions he had enjoyed for less than one night was of the briefest. He had hardly had time to take them in properly, and undoubtedly there had been present at the back of his mind the feeling that a man with a brain so fertile in expedients as Mr Falck's might conceive a dozen different ways of disposing of his daughter's hand to his own advantage before he actually laid it in that of a bridegroom. Yes, there was no use in crying over spilt milk, and though Erna's prospective wealth made it obviously impossible for any prudent young man to reject her, Brand felt placidly that he could be quite content with Melifred—especially if Horace wanted her. It was quite likely that Erna would expect him to dance attendance on her whims, whereas Melifred would know—or if not, would very soon learn—that it was for her to consult his. Yes, let the golden visions go; he would be far more comfortable without them.

There was plenty to think about as he tramped through the jungle and across the uplands to Thakip, where he was to take boat for the capital. He knew, without having been told it in

words, that he was still being given the chance to redeem his character after the bungling way in which he had handled the matter of Horace's removal. Mr Falck had pointed out briefly what he was to do, but he had a free hand as to the details. The main points were the disposing of Peter Tourneur and the stirring-up of popular disturbances in Bandeir. Peter was the main obstacle to Mr Falck's plans for taking over the government, whether with Horace's aid or without it, and a certain amount of disaffection was necessary to give colour to the fiction that he found himself obliged to step in and restore order, lest sedition should spread to his own domains. But the amount of disturbance had to be nicely graduated—not serious enough on the one hand to invite the danger of British intervention from Singapore, and grave enough on the other to unite the European and native communities in permitting, if not actually requesting, their rescuer to take a hand in their affairs for the future. In like manner Peter must not die in circumstances that would rouse general sympathy on his behalf, nor yet so universally execrated that an indiscriminate massacre of Europeans would naturally follow. Brand felt something of Mr Falck's own artistic interest in such things as he considered the problems before him. It was like weighing the moves in a game of chess, and there was not merely victory to be thought of, but the bringing it about in the simplest manner, and with the least expenditure of money, effort, and life. As he walked, and still more as he floated down the river, he constructed schemes of action, testing them by imagining all sorts of unlikely complications, and rejected one after another as it was found wanting. At last he had his rough plan drawn out, though he was ready—or at least, he hoped so—to modify it in any point that might prove necessary. He would not go straight to Bandeir by water, but would land some distance above the town, and seek out by night his confederate Ong, the Chinese druggist, from whom he would obtain the latest news of the politics of the place. By his means he could communicate with Pangeran Nasir-ud-din and the other Malay chiefs, and confide to them secretly that their Tungku Muda had been murdered at the instigation of his uncle. The next day he would land openly, timing his arrival so that Peter would be in council, and would announce Horace's death

to him publicly, excusing his intrusion on the ground of the importance of the news. Then surely, surely, the unhappy man, horrified and taken aback, could be relied upon to say or do something that would stir up the chiefs to fall upon him there and then? But perhaps, to prevent a fiasco, it might be as well to arrange for a voice—from the verandah, say—to accuse him in so many words of plotting his nephew's murder. A scene of some sort there must be—a struggle—in which, if the worst came to the worst, Brand might rush nobly to his former chief's assistance and have an unfortunate accident with his revolver. Peter out of the way, there arose the question of the rest of the Europeans, since the state was quite sufficiently well organised for the permanent officials to carry on the government for a time. Several of them must also be removed, either by popular tumult or deliberate assassination, and it would be well to get rid of the Bishop also—both as a Berringer by marriage and because his death might tend to conciliate the heads of other creeds. Thus the way would be prepared for Mr Falck, following in his agent's track two days later at most, to stand forward as the apostle of law and order in the scene of confusion.

Thus Brand matured his schemes, involving the sacrifice of an indefinite number of lives, and risking the destruction of the edifice slowly raised during many years by the labours of Sir Gilbert Berringer and his co-workers—and never knew that throughout the whole course of his journey the avengers of blood were on his heels. Ill indeed had he done for himself when he laughed to scorn the appeal of Sah dying in torture, for though the Mahkyoons—with a relentless logic all their own—had carried out Sah's punishment to the bitter end, yet they added his fate as one more count in the indictment against the man who—so Sah had averred—had led him cunningly into attacking the life of the Tungku Muda. When Brand parted from Mr Falck, his steps were dogged by an emissary of the Mahkyoon chief Mat Hassan, who believed that Peter Tourneur was about to be informed of the imminent success of his plot against his nephew. But after the long colloquy between Horace and the tribes on the evening of that crowded day, there followed hotfoot on the trail of the first tracker three others, who now knew the truth, and were commissioned to see

justice done, without troubling the too tender feelings of the Tungku Muda. Two of them were Mahkyoons, famous even in the tribe for woodcraft and daring, the third was a youth of mixed race, whose Mahkyoon mother had run away with a Chinaman and who answered to the name of Appoo. In earlier days Appoo and the Mahkyoons would have felt an equal contempt and dislike the one for the other, but the disappearance of Horace after Sah's attack on him had united them in one aim. All that Appoo cared for was to rescue his master if living, to avenge him if dead, and he drank in as greedily as the Bandeir Malays had done the theory of Peter's anxiety to get rid of him. With his command of languages, his acquaintance with the strange ways of white men, he had been a valuable ally to the Mahkyoons in the negotiations which led to the alliance with the Warribows and the confederation against Mr Falek, and lurking among the tribesmen while Horace held his council, he had gained a grasp of the true state of affairs which had enabled him afterwards to make the situation clear to the sorely perplexed minds of the simpler race. As yet he had not made himself known to his master, nor did he intend to do so until he had atoned—in his own way—for his desertion of him at the rest-house. To be able to present himself to Horace as having hastened to Bandeir to silence all injurious rumours by bearing the news of the Tungku Muda's safety was what he aspired to do, but even more ardently did he look forward to avenging him, without his knowledge, on the false friend who had betrayed him.

Appoo's acquaintance with Bandeir made him a tower of strength to the simple-minded tribesmen who were equally determined with himself to put an end to anti-Berringer intrigue for the future, but had not the wildest notion how to do it. He unfolded his plans to the chiefs in secret session, after requiring a solemn oath that they should never be divulged—least of all to any European. He explained that he proposed to return to his master's service, and if the truth should ever come out, it would certainly cost him his post, and very likely involve additional penalties. The chiefs, realising the value of the position of Datu's "boy" to its holder, gave their promise readily, and having heard the scheme set forth, acclaimed it

with delight. The two best hunters of the Mahkyoons were placed under Appoo's orders, as was the man already sent out when they came up with him—and thus began that silent, deadly pursuit of which Brand had not the smallest idea. It was easy for the four men to travel secretly, even along a track so comparatively well frequented as that parallel with the course of the river. The tribes on their way recognised them instinctively as a "head-party," such as only the very oldest knew otherwise than by tradition nowadays, and gave them food, shelter, and information as they passed. Brand, floating down with the current, travelled faster than his pursuers struggling with the jungle, but there were bends in the river when they could save time by cutting across instead of going round. Each night they inspected his camp and verified his presence—and all without their existence being so much as suspected. He might spin his webs and test them for flaws, but spinner and webs were destined to be swept away together.

On the last night of Brand's voyage, Appoo's heart beat high with pride. As he had expected, his quarry neither pushed on to the capital nor landed to spend the night at the boat-station. He had his boat moored to the bank, but told his men he would spend the night on board. They landed as usual to make a fire and cook their food, and the four watchers—posted with extreme care by Appoo—saw Brand come to the entrance of the mat shelter which served as cabin, assure himself that his crew and servants were all ashore and well occupied, and return for his hat. Then he set foot on the gang-plank to land in his turn. As he did so, the plank was wrenched noiselessly away, and he fell between the boat and the bank. The water was not deep, but ensconced in the shadow of the boat's side were the two Mahkyoon hunters. The one startled cry he gave as he fell—which had not even reached the ears of his men sitting round their fire—was the only one, for the Mahkyoons knew their business. Deliberately, determinedly—as Sanson had once suggested he might hold Horacé Berringer—they held him under water till he died, and his life and his schemes ended together. Then the gang-plank was restored to its position, and the two men waded down-stream some little distance, dragging the body with them. They carried it ashore at a spot where the

bank was much trodden by people landing from boats, and through the jungle into one of the patches of swamp that abounded. When Appoo and one of the Mahkyoons emerged from the cane-brake, they carried a trophy carefully wrapped up in leaves, but the body, under the charge of the other two, was sinking deeper and deeper into the fathomless mire. Appoo led the way unflinching. He had been present when Sah made his dying confession, and knew who was the conspirators' agent in Bandeir, and when the streets were discreetly silent, Ong the druggist was knocked up, as happened not unfrequently, by a belated customer. With the utmost coolness, Appoo told his tale in the Chinaman's sanctum. Sah had accomplished his purpose, and slain the man who had been sent to kidnap Mahkyoon children for sacrifice. More than this, he had sent his head, that it might be built into the river-wall,—Appoo had noticed with great satisfaction that the uppermost course of concrete blocks was not yet quite complete. Would the learned Mr Ong lend his honourable help to accomplish this worthy end? He was the only person whom the coolie watchmen would allow without suspicion to pass anywhere day or night—and with good reason, since he kept them and their fellows supplied with the opium they were forbidden to obtain.

Had Appoo been as innocent as he pretended to be, he would have been puzzled by the chuckle of irrepressible delight to which the learned man gave vent when he found himself asked, as he believed, to furnish the last and deadliest link of evidence against Peter by helping to build his nephew's head into his famous wall. But Mr Ong recovered himself quickly. It was not his part to act as informer, and he would not even ask to see the head, so that he might be properly surprised when it came to light—should untoward circumstances interfere with his safe departure beforehand from Bandeir. Letting Appoo and the Mahkyoon out by a door leading into another of the many lanes that made the China Bazar as confusing to the stranger as a rabbit-warren to a youthful terrier, he led the way to the strip of reclaimed land, covered with mat sheds and building *débris*, which at present represented the terrace which the river-wall was to safeguard. One or two watchmen challenged softly,

but recognising the cadaverous figure in the immense spectacles, let him pass with his companions, and they reached without alarm the large wooden frames in which the concrete which had been worked during the day was slowly setting into the shape of great blocks. He led the way along the line of frames, testing the contents of each with his stick.

"This is the last—I thought so!" he murmured at length. "It is scarcely harder than the river-mud. See! the coolies have left their spades. This is the place."

Gloatingly he watched in the starlight as Appoo dug one of the spades deep into the soft mass, and turned it round to make a hollow, into which the Mahkyoon deftly dropped the head he carried, without allowing a spot of blood to fall on the undisturbed surface. Then the concrete held up by the spade was released and allowed to flow back over the secret it covered, and the top smoothed and made level. Mr Ong chuckled again.

"I am thinking what a surprise Tuan Pitah will have when his guilt is proved by his own handiwork!" he said.

They were the last words he spoke. There was a short sharp struggle—soundless save for the quick breaths and soft footfalls of the men who strove—and then the Mahkyoon rose from the very brink of the unfinished terrace with another head in his hand. Appoo, panting, seized the spade, and made a hole as before at the other end of the frame, the Chinaman's head was thrown in and covered, and the top made smooth again. The Mahkyoon, questing from side to side, sought hither and thither for any traces of what had been done, then smiled with honest pride.

"Nothing anywhere. It was well carried out," he said.

"No blood on the face of the wall?"

"None. The body fell at once into deep water."

"And below the town there are the alligators," said Appoo contentedly, and they picked their way back as they had come, slipping past the nearest watchman with an ease that filled them with contempt for him. Returning to their confederates in the swamp, all four took a solemn oath that for all of them the events of that night were thenceforth blotted out as completely as though they had not been. The fate of Brand and of Ong would pass into Bandeir tradition as an insoluble mystery equally with

the question who had first set on foot the sinister rumours about the heads that were to be built into the river-wall to ensure its permanence. Then, with untroubled consciences, the four made themselves a shelter of branches, and slept the sleep of the weary.

The next day a travel-stained Appoo presented himself before Peter, who was on his way to council with a brow furrowed with anxiety. He had had no news for days from his wife and Mr Tarker, and the chiefs were becoming truculent in their enquiries for the Tungku Muda. More than this, even the Europeans were inclined to become suspicious, having heard the enquiries evaded so often. They did not suspect Peter of murdering his nephew, but they were beginning to think Horace must be dead, and his uncle trying to keep the fact secret, for fear of a popular rising. Hence nothing would satisfy Peter but that Appoo should tell his good news to the council with his own mouth, and there followed a dramatic transformation scene. The haughty Malay nobles in their gold embroidered satins and velvets, and the damascened kris the jewelled handles of which they had of late developed an unpleasant habit of turning round—as though for instant use—when they entered the presence of the Tuan Wazir, listened confounded to the staccato accents of the little sharp-featured man belonging to the mixed race they despised. The Tungku Muda was not far off, he was on his way to Bandeir, he sent his greetings to his beloved uncle, and bade him use all diligence—Appoo believed in doing things thoroughly while he was about it—to finish his white pathway, so that the ruler might set foot upon it on his arrival.

The change in the attitude of the council was so complete as to be almost comic. Peter was overwhelmed with attentions and protestations, and had difficulty in warding off the efforts of the chiefs to turn their hordes of untrained retainers out on the fore-shore to finish the river-wall there and then. They would probably have finished it in a sense they did not intend, and Peter had to make it very clear that if the Datu's eye was not to be offended by irregularities of surface, the work must be left in the hands of the coolies who had already laboured at it so long. When he had made it fairly certain that the terrace would not be forcibly invaded by the army of the ignorant, and had

received the congratulations of his European colleagues, he had time to think of rewarding Appoo for the mental relief he owed him. Appoo's demands were agreeably modest. He wanted only a *chit* to take to his master, asking him to reinstate the bearer in his service, as one who had rendered good service to the Government, and Peter would have done far more for him had he asked it. But for Appoo he would not even have known that his nephew was alive, far less that he had "done with all that foolery," and was on his way to take his proper position in Bandeir, until several anxious days later, when letters at last arrived.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BRINGING THE KING BACK.

BESIDES the expected epistles from his wife and Horace, Peter Tourneur's mail from up-country included a little twisted note, written evidently on a leaf torn from a pocket-book, and addressed in pencil to "E. A. Saasom, Esq., Singapore," which Horace enclosed in his letter, and asked his uncle to put in an envelope and send on at the earliest possible opportunity. It was the result of a conversation between Erna and Melifred, which took place in camp near the ruins of Falckenheim, at the time when Mr Falck's servants and assistants were still being retrieved from the various hiding-places where they had sought refuge, or brought in half-dead after two or three days' wandering in the jungle.

"Milly," said Erna suddenly, "I want you to get your Horace"—this with a view to setting Melifred's mind at rest as to any prior claim on Horace's affections—"to put me in the treaty."

"To put you in the treaty!" repeated Melifred, bewildered.

"The treaty he and Papa are going to make, stupid!" Since their rescue, Erna had honestly tried to be polite to Melifred, being in dire need of her assistance, but habit often proved too strong for her. "About Papa's giving up this horrid country to him, you know, in return for the diamonds—though I should have said he ought to be paid for taking it. But anyhow, what I mean is, couldn't it be put into the treaty that I was to marry whoever I liked?"

"But, Erna, how could it? It's no business of Horace's—I mean, can't you see? you couldn't mix up that sort of thing in

a legal agreement. Besides, even if you could, it would look as if your father was not to be trusted—after he promised you should do as you liked.”

“But he isn’t, and you know it as well as I do,” said Erna, with disconcerting plainness of speech. “He would say anything I wanted here, in the most beautiful language, and then when we were once safe away, he would plan and manœuvre me into a corner, until I had to do what he wanted instead.”

“But he couldn’t *make* you do what you don’t want.”

“Yes, he can. I’m not like you. You don’t know what it is to be really afraid, as I am afraid of him.”

Melifred thought she did know what it was to be really afraid, and even of Mr Falck, though she had not the misfortune to be his daughter. But she had watched over Erna so long—guarding her from some scrapes and getting her out of others—that she felt in a way responsible for her happiness, and not least because to her scrupulous conscience she seemed to have taken Horace from her. That Erna herself had dismissed Horace made no difference, because if Melifred had not existed they might have come together again. Therefore Melifred deliberated anxiously the question of Erna’s future, and Erna, as usual content to have thrust off her burden on some one else’s shoulders, lay back in Mrs Tourneur-Durell’s deck-chair—the only one of which the party was possessed, handed over to her as an invalid—and looked extraordinarily pretty. The frightful experience of three days before seemed not to have left the slightest trace upon her mind. Melifred wondered sometimes whether she had ever realised what was happening, or thought the fall, which had so happily rendered her unconscious, was merely an accident.

“I think,” said Melifred, and Erna looked up with interest, “the best thing for you to do would be to write to Mr Sansom. If you really do want to marry him, that is.”

“If!” said Erna indignantly. “Of course I do. Don’t you know that by this time? Well, what do you want me to say?”

“I don’t want you to say anything! It’s for you to say what you feel. If he came to Bandeir, perhaps Mr Falck would feel he had to let you be engaged, after what he said the other night—— Oh dear! I hope I am not being dishonourable,

when I know he does not like Mr Sansom! But he did say——”

“He needn't think I'm going to be satisfied with that!” exclaimed Erna with energy, disregarding Melfred's scruples. “If he once lets us be engaged, we shall be married too—on the same day as you.” Melfred doubted this. “Then I shall be safe. Yes, I will write to Alonzo at once. Mr Tarker will give me a leaf out of his diary.”

Naturally Mr Falck was not informed of the mine which was designed to explode under his feet, or the poignancy of his wounded feelings might have rendered the journey to Bandeir even more disagreeable than it was. Few of the inhabitants of Falckenheim had been able to save more than what they stood up in, and Mrs Tourneur-Durell and Mr Tarker, who had travelled light, could do little to supply deficiencies for so many. Then, ostensibly to avoid the risk of collisions with the tribesmen, Horace—prompted by Mr Tarker—felt obliged to ask the Palbat contingent to hand over their rifles, and though this was but the barest necessary precaution when they outnumbered the Bandeir party so greatly, they took it very ill indeed, and posed thenceforth as prisoners going into captivity. Even when thus disarmed, they gave Mr Tarker a good many anxious moments, and forced him to claim the help of the tribesmen as guard and escort much more than he liked, though Horace and he resisted the temptation to violate the Berringer rule by temporarily distributing among them the surrendered firearms. Mr Tarker was to return to Palbat and act as Resident until districts could be definitely marked out and district officers appointed, but he insisted—and his ruler was very glad to agree—on accompanying the party until they were within reach of help should Mr Falck be moved suddenly to attempt a *coup-d'état* in the belief that the natives would not be used against him. It was certain that there must be disaffection in Bandeir, to have brought about the state of affairs Mrs Tourneur-Durell described, and it seemed hopeless to imagine that it would all fade away before the mere appearance of the Datu, so that material would be at hand on which to work, even if it had not been purposely prepared.

Entirely destitute of camp equipment and spare clothes, and increasingly so of footgear, the representatives of the Palbat

Company quitted its domains in the society of their supplanters, who were very nearly as badly off as themselves. The small supply of European food was soon exhausted, and the travellers learned to take a keen personal interest in the prowess of the native hunters, and to know the taste of fern-roots and curious jungle fruits. Rough carrying-chairs were knocked together in the halt before starting for the benefit of the ladies and Pélagie, who had accompanied Mr Falck on his quest for his daughter—the two amahs had very wisely taken advantage of the destruction of Falckenheim to disappear, and those who knew were of opinion that they would readily find homes and husbands among the Warribows—but the men had perforce to walk. Horace, despite his recent illness, persisted—out of nothing but sheer wicked pride, Melifred said severely—in footing it gaily with the rest, until he collapsed ignominiously, falling fainting half on the *batang* and half in the mud beside it. When he opened his eyes, he was in Melifred's chair, and she was walking, and it did not sooth his feelings to reflect that she was much better able to do it than he was. But far from exulting in the fulfilment of her prophecies, Melifred was so apologetic, so genuinely anxious lest he should feel hurt, that it would have needed a far harder heart than Horace's to cherish a grudge against her, and Mrs Tournour-Durell smiled as she heard them talking.

"Melifred is learning a lesson," she remarked to Mr Tarker, who happened to be near her.

"And what may that be?" he enquired, with almost as much interest as if it had been a new variant in folk-tales.

"That men are not managed by reason merely," she said, with a smile to the memory of Peter Tournour in his youth.

"But who ever thought they were?" asked Erna, opening wide grey-blue eyes. Young she might be, but she knew quite as much about managing men as Mrs Tournour-Durell, and a good deal more than Mr Tarker, who pointed out at length that obviously only young men in love could be intended. He himself, for instance, never remembered being swayed otherwise than by reason in his life.

Horace's quarrel with the journey was that he could never see anything of Melifred—which sounded paradoxical, since she was always close at hand. But whereas it would have

seemed natural that he should walk beside her chair—or, for part of the day's march at any rate, she beside his—talking as much as they liked, since the bearers understood no English, unfortunately *batangs* are not constructed with the idea of any one's walking beside any one else. In camp the world was too much with them to allow of any private conversation, and no youth and maiden in their senses would dream of going off for a walk in a Jhalábor jungle. There are no paths, for one thing, and that is about the least of the disabilities. But he did please himself with thinking that when they reached Peveril—where they were to make another short halt to dismiss their Warribow and Mahkyoon escorts, and enable Mr Tarker to send for some of his Thakip men, who, if no heroes, were too loyal, or too stupid, for Mr Falck to have any chance of sapping their fealty—they would be able to wander at will among the rose- and flame-coloured thickets of rhododendron. He had forgotten who he was, and the deep interest which all his proceedings aroused in the minds of his people. Did he and Melifred set out for a walk, the woods proved to be alive; every bush had its occupant, every pitcher-plant, almost, its pair of staring eyes. Did they sit down—with due precautions against snakes—on a fallen tree to enjoy the beauties of nature, here tricked out in her most gorgeous attire, a glance round would show that they themselves were affording the most intense enjoyment to a group silently closing in on them from behind, and gazing entranced. There was no relief from this affectionate persecution for two out of the three days of their stay, but on the second evening help arrived unexpectedly. Mounting the steps of the verandah outside his room, Horace came suddenly upon a fight which was being waged noiselessly, but with extreme fury. The combatants were rolling over one another, mutually punching, pinching, pulling hair, and biting, with great vehemence. When he succeeded in separating them, one proved to be Mr Tarker's boy, who had accepted the charge of waiting upon Horace as a most unwarrantable addition to his labours, but seemed now to consider it a privilege not lightly to be resigned. The other was Appoo,

who hastily recovered his head-handkerchief, straightened his disordered garments by one or two frantic pulls, and evaded the necessity of answering his master's stern question what he was doing there by presenting a note from Tuan Pitah. Horace opened it in surprise.

"DEAR HORACE,—The bearer, who has just brought me the welcome news that you are alive and in your right mind, asks me to beg you to take him on again. He says he deserted you when you were in a tight place. Of course the truth may be that you dismissed him for some fault, but if not, I hope you may feel able to give him his old post again, for he has got me out of an uncommonly nasty hole by turning up just now.

"Your aff. uncle,

P. T."

"You went all the way to Bandeir to tell Tuan Peter I was safe?" asked Horace, astonished.

"Tuan!" Appoo beamed brightly.

"But why? What made you think of such a thing?"

"Tuan angly I lunning away. I t'inking watehee Tuan liking—makee Tuan taking me back."

"Oh, all right!" said Horace, still puzzled. "You won't find very much to do at present, though."

"I doing eberyting Tuan wanting," responded Appoo, with a gesture of such magnificence as seemed to imply that it would be a small thing to procure the moon if his master happened to desire it. And sure enough, he did prove himself able to ensure the next day what his master wished for most in the world at the moment—a reasonable amount of privacy. How he did it was not apparent—Melifred suggested that he arranged cunningly contrived spy-holes, and sold the right of looking through them to the highest bidder—but at any rate he kept off the crowding troops of admirers. And if this involved his own close attendance—well, as Horace said, nobody could mind his expressionless presence more than that of a wooden image.

From Peveril the attendant tribesmen returned to their several homes, upon Horace's faithful promise to visit them before long with his bride, and really taste their hospitality. The departure of each tribe was preceded by a lengthy ceremony, in which Horace ensured the prosperity of his subjects during his absence by rehearsing a catalogue of good wishes while holding in one hand a white fowl, and in the other a white handkerchief filled with gold-dust, after which a measure of husked rice was brought forward, into which he was requested to breathe long and deeply, that the benefits of his influence might be distributed with the rice to all the families of the tribes. The Sakyans were duly settled within limits fixed by him, with hunting rights over a larger area, secured to them by the most alarming maledictions, but these were hardly necessary. The tendency of the two more powerful tribes to persecute the Sakyans was akin to that which makes it impossible for a dog not to chivy another dog that always ran away from him. Now, secure in the consciousness of service rendered to the state and the favour of the ruler, the Sakyans were becoming so cheerful and independent that it was to be feared the Mahkyoons and Warribows would soon be irritated into chastising them for impudence.

The boat voyage down the river from Thakip was almost as fruitless as the jungle tramp in providing opportunities for private conversation, but there was sometimes the chance of a walk in the evening, when the camp was pitched in more open ground, and this chance, so Horace said, kept him alive. In reality, he was not at all anxious for the voyage to come to an end, owing to a well-grounded fear of the pomp and circumstance that would be awaiting him at Bandeir. The reality was quite as bad as the expectation. From the moment he stepped on board the state barge, which had come up to meet him at the boat-station, and the golden umbrella, so long furled, was opened over his head, he was never allowed to forget for a moment that he was the king coming to his kingdom, and that he ought to have come to it long ago. In vain he made pathetic endeavours to induce his aunt or Melifred to share with him the lonely glories of the platform on which he sat enthroned at the

stern; they laughed at him from their comfortable obscurity below, and left him the cynosure of all eyes. Prahus with tapering masts and sails like butterflies' wings, and boats decked with flags and streamers of all the colours of the rainbow, crowded with Malays in white jackets embroidered with gold and gaily-tinted sarongs, accompanied the barge, following her, preceding her, and often impeding her, to the imminent peril of the lives of their passengers. The banks of the river were lined with more crowds, in more colours, clapping hands and raising shrill cries of welcome. Gongs were clanging, drums beating, every man who had a gun of any kind was firing it off until his powder was exhausted, while small boys in small boats used their paddles to thump the gunwales loudly; and when they most deservedly capsized, swam about like ducks, adding to the tumult by yelling joyfully with all their might. And thus, in a frenzy of colour and a pandemonium of sound, Berringer of Bandeir came back to his own.

There was a dramatic hush—the nature of which did not at first dawn upon the Europeans—when the barge approached the steps, white in the white river-wall, which formed the central portion of Peter's great achievement. He stood at the top with the other members of the Council, to welcome the new ruler, and on either hand and behind them the dense throngs held their breath, while the boats drew off and formed a semicircle glittering with eager eyes, as the rowers on the right-hand side of the barge lifted their oars, and those on the left paddled gently to bring her to the steps. Would the fair white cement crack and break up in ruin when the Datu set foot on it? Or—darker thought—would the Datu fall dead when he touched what many in the crowd still firmly believed to be the barrier erected to prevent his advent and strengthened against him by all the arts of evil? Not realising in the least what was at stake, Horace quitted his elevated seat joyfully, and sprang ashore. Running up the steps, with the umbrella-bearer in hot pursuit, he grasped Peter's hand.

"Hullo, uncle, here we are, you see! I'm afraid I've given you a lot of bother, and now I'm going to bother you a lot more. But how awfully jolly your steps are!"

His gesture explained his meaning to the Malays around, and in that moment the myth which had grown up about the river-wall shrivelled and died. No one attempted to explain it away or apologise for it; it simply passed out of existence. Only Appoo hugged himself in secret, and reflected that the completion and the present stability of the great wall were entirely due to him.

A crowded hour or two followed. The Council were presented—a lengthy proceeding, since each man had to recount exactly how well he had known Sir Gilbert Berringer, and quote any flattering remarks Sir Gilbert might have made to him—then the members of the Service, the heads of the various communities, and the other principal men of the state. Then there was a procession to the Court-house, where Horace took the oaths of office his father had taken before him, and the Council and chiefs took an oath to him, and then another procession—in boats this time—across the river to the Cathedral, for a thanksgiving service and the welcome of the native Christian community. And all the time, as Horace pointed out indignantly afterwards, Melifred might never have existed! It was not etiquette for him even to mention her until he had formally acquainted his Council of his intention to marry—far less catch her eye—and he had to be thankful if he could distinguish her hat in the dim distance. This remoteness deprived him of the chance of witnessing a little comedy, which Melifred and Mrs Tourneur-Durell enjoyed immensely. The three ladies had hoped to snatch a few minutes for running into Government House and repairing in some measure the deficiencies of toilet of which they were but too well aware; but it seemed to be taken for granted that all alike would proceed to the Court-house and the Cathedral and at once.

"Just like Peter!" thought his wife, with an irrepressible smile. "Of course he would never think of such a thing as a best bonnet!" Then Melifred pinched her arm gently, and she saw a slim sallow-faced man making his way towards them. A gasp from Erna told her who he was, and involuntarily she glanced at Mr Falck to see what he thought of the meeting. His face was dark as he stepped forward.

"I did not expect to see you here, Sansom. Why haf you left Singapore in my absence?"

"Because I asked him, Papa!" said Erna boldly, slipping round her parent and linking her arm in Mr Sansom's. "I don't know how he got here so quickly, but he knows how glad I am to see him."

"Is this my reward, Erna?" asked Mr Falck bitterly. "Are my hopes to be dashed to the ground by my child at this moment of the ruins of my worldly plans?"

"How can you say you are ruined, Papa? With all those diamonds!"

"Your father takes things too seriously, my sweet," said Mr Sansom, with a smile which Melifred could not help thinking must have struck Mr Falck as supremely unpleasant. "With my poor assistance, and the aid of the diamonds of which you have told me, he will soon be richer than ever. The cleverest of us fail"—was there a double meaning here?—"sometimes, but no one who sticks to his friends—and whose friends stick to him—need be a failure long."

The threat was too obvious to escape the notice even of those who could only guess at the inwardness of Mr Falck's schemes from what they had seen of their outcome. To Mr Falck himself it spoke with painful plainness, but he rose to meet it valiantly.

"Then I am no more a failure," he said, with what almost succeeded in being lightness of tone, "since my little one will form a golden link between her father and her bridegroom." Mr Sansom looked sheepish, and Erna clung to his arm more possessively than ever. Her father eyed her a moment, then turned to Mrs Tourneur-Durell, and relieved his pent-up feelings by a poignant aside. "Gracious lady, pity me! Now I know what it is to feel like Shylock when the play ends."

Night was coming on, and Bandeir was illuminating itself in honour of its Datu. On either side of the river, wreaths and rows and clusters of tiny lamps were making fairyland out of the most unpromising materials. The party at Government House, allowed in consideration of Horace's recent illness to escape with

a family dinner to-night, were to row up and down in the barge afterwards, and enjoy the full effect.

"It really is awfully pretty," said Horace, as from the terrace they watched the points of light beginning to appear here and there, "but it seems rather a pity to turn everything on to-night. They ought to keep a little in hand for—next month," he squeezed Melifred's hand, which was tucked into his arm, in the friendly darkness.

"Oh, don't be afraid!" laughed the Bishop. "What you see to-night is nothing to the display we shall get up for your wedding. We shall have had time for preparation then."

"And you'll see that 'Todgers's *can* do it when it chooses,' " put in his son Charley, who in intercourse with Europeans always endeavoured conscientiously to soften the severity of his clerical manners by means of more or less ribald quotation. He and his sister went back across the river to hold evening service and go the rounds of hospital and school before dinner, and Horace and Melifred laughed at them, though with due appreciation, as they snatched a minute or two for talk before going to dress.

"I can just imagine how sick they must have been when they heard I was myself!" said Horace. "I could see it in their eyes to-day—Albinia saying, 'What a specimen!' and Charley, 'To think that that rotter——!'"

"You are not a rotter!" said Melifred indignantly.

"You know very well I was, a year ago—the very worst kind. Oh, I don't wonder a bit at their feeling like that—thinking I am not the man for Bandeir. I funk the job horribly myself. But after all, it *is* my job."

"Of course it is, and it's nonsense saying that you funk it. You have begun splendidly. The tribes are just as devoted to you as if you were your father come to life again."

"Yes, but that's just because I am my father's son. And after all, how little it means—their devotion, I mean. That river-wall, now. I thought when we came in sight of it to-day how, after all these years, they were quite ready to believe that we wanted to bury heads in it, though it was contrary to every law my father ever made."

"Yes, but the idea was put into their minds, you know. Mr Tarker says he should not be surprised if Mr Falck had had agents preparing his way for years, and we don't yet know all the things he was mixed up in."

"Yes, but it's not only that. It's the little difference that all these years of work have made. I know how disappointed my father was, how it seemed to him that in comparison with the hopes he had at the beginning, he had done nothing whatever, and if he felt that——! Think what he was, and what I am."

"Perhaps it is all the better that you should feel uncertain of yourself, and not have too high expectations," suggested Melifred, realising that reaction had come after all the excitement of the day. "And anyhow, it is your job, as you say, and you can only work at it. So long as you do your best, it doesn't signify whether you succeed or fail."

"What a comforting doctrine!" Horace laughed a little. "And so absolutely opposed to everything you really believe! Oh, Melifred, you are a humbug!"

"I'm not! You know what I mean—perfectly well. It is your yourself that signifies, and whether you put the best of you into your work, and not whether people call you a success or not. And when I think of what you were a year ago, as you say——"

"Well, if I don't put the best of myself into my work, it'll be my own fault. With you to help me on——"

"Kind of girl I can't stand." The voice came apparently from just over their heads. "Never thinks anything can go on at all unless she is pushing behind." They had to think before they realised that their elders were talking in the room behind them, and that Uncle Peter, prowling up and down after his wont, must have spoken just as he approached the window.

"Oh, I say, what a shame!" cried Horace, struggling up from his low chair, but Melifred pulled him down again.

"A shame of you to fit the cap on me, you mean! Why, your uncle may not have meant me at all."

The Bishop's pleasant laugh floated out. "Depends upon the

man, Peter—depends upon the man! Some men need pushing, you know."

"That means me, at any rate!" said Horace, laughing, but Melifred's eyes were full of tears.

"But I don't want to be like that—always a sort of spur or goad," she protested. "Oh, Horace, if I ever am—dictatorial and domineering and horrid, you know—hold out your hand to me as you did *that* day, and say, 'Melifred!' and I shall remember, and understand."

THE END.

